Merze

by

Marah Ellis Ryan

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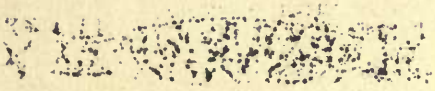

TO MY MOTHER.

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Merze

The Story of an Actress

By Marah Ellis Ryan

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MERZE:

THE STORY OF AN ACTRESS.

PROLOGUE.

"And you can't possibly stay more than one day, Drande?"

"Not very well, considering that even this lay-over will cost me extra work. I should be in St. Louis to-day, but I could not resist the temptation to pay a flying visit when I was so near."

"Father will be disappointed because your visit is not longer."

"And my creditors will be disappointed if it be. We can't all live on the fat of the land, Glenn, as you folks do at the Homestead—at least, not without paying for it. I am still paying for fat that fell into the fire five years ago."

The tone was rueful, but the smile in the dark eyes disclaimed all serious scorchings from the flames. The two rode on, single file, along the bridle-path—a near cut across the hill—one belonging to the range that glides along the south shore of the Ohio River and

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reaches back into the interior of Kentucky. Suddenly the boy, who was ahead, turned in his saddle and said :

"You remember, Drande, your last visit—and the tragedy?"

"I have cause to, as it kept me here several days after I should have been gone."

"Oh, that's so! I left for school that day. I only know of it by hearsay. This path leads us in sight of the house. See? You can get a view of it from here."

"Yes," assented the other, reining in his horse and gazing across the little valley to where a log house stood on a little plateau of meadow, back of which the hills rose dark and shadowy. It had a deserted, forlorn look ; cattle browsed around the door and stood in the cool water of the spring, placidly chewing their cud, as if knowing there was none to say them nay.

"Is it empty?" asked the older man, looking at the house with interest.

"Empty? yes ; father can't get a tenant in it for love or money, and none of the darkies will work alone at this end of the place. They vow that Mignot and that dead unknown walk on dark nights along that path through the clearing. I doubt if any of them have ever ventured near it on a dark night to prove or disprove the spectral tale. Father intends turning the old house into a shed for the young cattle that graze over here. It does look dreary, doesn't it?"

"Rather," answered the other, laconically.

"Not as much as it did a year ago—a little over a year since it happened, isn't it? Then Jack's whistling or swearing and the dog's barking kept it noisy

if not cheery, to say nothing of the girl, who was a host in herself."

"Have you seen her since?" The tone was carelessly questioning, but not so the eyes, had the youth noticed them. Whoever had been the occupants of the deserted house, they were not entirely without interest for this stranger. "Seen her?" repeated Glenn; "can we see last year's tiger lilies? I suppose roses or snow is a more poetic comparison, but tiger lilies seemed to suit Merze best. No, we have seen no more of her than if the earth had opened and buried her under the plateau. And do you know," he continued, half-jesting, half in earnest, "nothing would surprise me concerning that girl—not even the possession of a familiar spirit that could cart her away unseen to another world—I fear it would have been the lower one."

"Yes; she was a strange child," said the man, musingly, gazing across at the cows flicking off the flies and crowding close under the shade of the trees. "A very peculiar character, with material in it for much good or much evil."

Glenn turned as if in surprise at the words:

"Why, Drande! did you know her?"

The other straightened up in the saddle and touched his horse as if to shake off his musings by motion.

"Know her? Well, hardly. I saw her once before, and then on the morning after, the shooting. But, if you remember, you gave me some information as to the beauty of her character."

The young fellow laughed, as he cut with his whip at the chestnut leaves brushing in their faces as they passed.

"The beauty was not often discernible, for even at her

best there was something approaching 'uncanniness' about her; she was so unlike all other girls. Those big eyes of hers would look at you, or through you, as solemn as an owl's; hungry-looking eyes—the sort one would rather see in daylight with the sun shining. Poor little imp! I think she found life a pretty rough affair with Jack."

"You seem to have been much interested in her," said the other, banteringly; but Glenn did not notice it.

"One could not help it if they knew her well. She had so many ambitions far beyond anything that was ever likely to come to her. Where she got them was a mystery! I think she would have sold her soul—if she had known she possessed such a thing—for books or knowledge. Do you know, Drande," he continued, slackening up his horse as the path verged into the road where they could ride abreast, "do you know that girl of fifteen had never remembered seeing a Bible in her home, or had never been taught anything whatever of any religion? Her only ideas of a Deity were gathered from Jack's oaths and a dilapidated copy of Homer's Iliad that she had got among some ragman's wares. The gods of the Greeks were as well known to her as Jack and the dogs, but of the Christian Deity or the saints she was as ignorant as I am of Choctaw—a veritable heathen, despite the knowledge she had managed to pick up in other things."

"A devotee of the Greek gods in this Nineteenth Century and in the Kentucky hills must surely have been an oddity," and the man smiled at the idea.

"Oh, as for a devotee—I don't say that," expostulated Glenn; "only she knew nothing else. Her mother had come of a family where religious observances were en-

forced to such a degree as to make them hateful to her. She did not seem a bad woman—not entirely so at least; but she simply detested all mention of the subject. And as for Jack—well, you may know from hearsay how much of a religious training a child would get through him."

"A strange life for a child," commented the other, "and one that raises theories in the mind as to what sort of a woman such childhood would lead to."

"I could not imagine it leading to a commonplace one."

"The commonplace lives have most content, my boy; but time tells all things, though it is not likely to tell us in this case, since she has been spirited out of our ken by jealous friends, relatives, or, as you say, familiar spirits. Well, the blessing of her gods go with her!" The speaker touched his horse into a canter, and they sped down along the country road, cool and shadowy from the timber on either side, while here and there, through the break of a clearing, they could see the hills far to the south like green billows fading away into the haze of blue. They did not refer again to the tragedy of the log house, whatever it was, or to the girl whom Glenn had compared to the tiger lilies. But, though the dark-eyed handsome man of the world had a cause of interest unknown to the boy, no foreshadowing of fate brought to him the knowledge of how closely his threads of life were to be interwoven with those of the child they mentioned—the young pagan of the Kentucky hills.

CHAPTER I.

One year previous to the conversation given between the horsemen of the bridle path, the blue smoke was curling lazily from the cross-stick chimney of the log house on the grassy plateau—an ordinary building consisting of two rooms down stairs and one up. The large room down stairs was used as parlor, kitchen, dining-room, and library ; for, beside the shelves on which the household crockery was displayed, another one held a few books—worn they were and tattered, showing that they had been used by someone who did not keep them for ornaments.

The floor was bare, with the exception of a woven strip of rag carpet at one door and a brilliant-hued Turkish rug at the other. The same odd house-furnishing was shown in everything ; a lounge was manufactured out of drygoods boxes and covered with a piece of heavy old brocaded stuff which had evidently once been a curtain, as the companion to it was tacked as a screen to the doorway leading into a small back room. Some rough wooden chairs were scattered about the room, while in the centre was a large table of polished dark wood with handsomely-carved legs. It was without cover, but on one end was set a luncheon of bread and some cold meat. The fire was low on the hearth of the wide open fireplace, and a man, entering the open door, glanced toward it, muttering an imprecation ; then, looking at the curtained door, he said sharply : "Merze !" Receiving no answer, he called again, this

time from the open doorway leading to the yard. Still no sound came to him save the hum of insects in the grasses, or the call of the cattle to one another down in the meadows; not a sign or sound of humanity broke the quiet of the late afternoon. Then a whistle, sharp, loud, and clear, broke from his lips, and, as it died away, a voice answered:

"All right; I'm coming," and a girl rose quickly from where she had lain in the long grass under the shade trees of the old spring-house, and ran swiftly up the irregular stone steps that led to above the spring. In one hand she carried a fine dark-braided hat, somewhat the worse for wear; in the other a book and some pieces of brown paper on which she had evidently been writing.

"Hurry up here! it's a strange thing you can never be in the house when you are wanted," called the man, impatiently.

The girl's speed slackened. A sullen look swept over her face and made it almost ugly. She stopped and deliberately put on her hat, tying the strings with much care. Then, picking up the book she had carefully laid down in order to arrange her toilet, she proceeded leisurely to the house, as if unaware of the angry eyes watching her from the doorway.

The owner of the house muttered an oath, and seemed as if about to call again, but, instead of that, he turned and threw himself on the lounge with a half smile. He looked at her questioningly as she entered, not quite sure what phase of character might unfold itself for his benefit. The girl looked at him precisely as she would have looked at the lounge if he had not been there. An amused gleam crept into his eyes as they followed her

moving about the table, fixing the fire, bringing in chips, and making the coffee. When all was done she filled a delicately-painted cup, the handle of which was broken, and then announced:

"Your supper is ready."

"Well, you needn't snap out your words like that, as if the coffee was a cup of poison you were glad to pour out for me. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing," shortly answered the girl, who sat with her book, pencil, and brown paper on the door-step.

"Come, now, don't be cross."

"You wanted to make me cross, or you would not have called me when you saw I was coming as fast as I could."

"Well, you didn't injure yourself hurrying after I did call."

"You knew I wouldn't."

"I might have known it, with your stubborn, ugly temper. I'll bet there isn't a girl in the county like you."

"There isn't a girl in sixteen counties that's had to live like I have," she said, a little bitterly.

The man did not answer, but a half-sad, half-irritated look swept over his dark face as he glanced at the girl and held out his cup.

"Pour me some more coffee, Merze," and as he came over to the table he put his arm about the slight waist. "So you are not satisfied with the way you live, eh? And yet I'm not such a bad father after all. I've never been bad to you."

"I wouldn't let you. I'd run away. I'd go to ma's folks."

"I believe you would; but you will never need to, Merze. Just wait till our luck turns, then you'll agree

you were level-headed in sticking to me instead of that lot. We'll leave these hills and live in grand style when I get on my feet again. What do you say to that?"

"Nothing," answered the girl, turning away. These promises and plans were old tales to her.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing, except that I wouldn't drink any more of that new whiskey of Hazen's. It goes to your head."

"Don't meddle with what don't concern you, you impudent chit," growled the man, glaring at her across the table.

"You would like to throw that cup at my head, wouldn't you?" asked the girl, with an exasperatingly pleasant smile on her face. "But you'd better not; if it's broke you'll have to drink out of a tin one."

He set down the cup with a laugh.

"Wouldn't you let me use yours?"

"No, I wouldn't. You're too mean to—Oh, dada, I forgot! I made something for your dinner, and you never came home for it; look here!" and she unrolled a cloth from about a very dubious-looking brown lump like a loaf, and laid it on the table with an air of satisfaction.

"What is it?" he asked, eyeing it suspiciously.

"It's a cake!" she announced, proudly, "a pound-cake, I think."

"Yes, it looks as if it might be. How did you come to do it?"

"I asked Mrs. Cassell, the housekeeper at the Homestead, how she made cake, and to-day I tried it. It's good and sweet, anyway. Have some?"

"Yes. I'll swallow it if it kills me, and we'll bury the hatchet under layers of your pound-cake—and it

looks heavy enough to bury anything under, with a small chance of a resurrection."

This bit of sarcasm was lost on Merze, who forgot to be suspicious in her enjoyment of seeing him swallow some of the dark mass. She stood watching him eat it, which he did heroically, knowing her eyes were on him, and knowing if he did not appear to enjoy it he was likely not to have anything cooked for him for a full week.

An odd couple these two were : as odd as the furnishing of their house. One could tell at a glance that they were father and daughter, though to hear five minutes' conversation between them the listener would be apt to doubt it. The man was dark and rather handsome in a gypsy sort of fashion. His face was neither very good nor very bad, but the kind that might be seen in either a tramp sent to the workhouse for worthlessness, or in the mayor who condemns him—a man whose position in life depends almost entirely on circumstances and very little on his own will. There was boldness in the keen, dark eyes, but not strength of character ; and Merze, young as she was, had learned that, and many were the altercations between them in which her respect for his opinion was not always apparent; but they generally ended good naturedly enough, and Merze could tramp through the woods with him more like a boy would than a girl.

And this had been the girl's home life—not a good one for a girl to live, for no amount of careful school training can eradicate from a child's mind the impressions received through family relations, and no amount of teaching or sermons on duty could ever make Merze feel differently toward her father.

Her mother had married him for his handsome face

and dashing manners, and had been disowned by her family in consequence. Little by little the enamel wore off, until the clay in her idol shone through ; but she was one of those patient, long-suffering women to whom the thought of breaking her bonds never came. We do see such sometimes. In her mind he was still associated with the lover of her earlier imagination, and no amount of experience could ever quite dispel that glamour and reveal him to her in the same light in which the young eyes of Merze saw him and knew him.

And when she had died, a year before the opening of this story, it was with the conviction that it was no fault of his that he had gradually lowered both himself and her to the depths from which she would have shrunk in horror at the beginning of their united lives. But habit and association have proved chains strong enough to clog the sensitive instincts of stronger natures than hers had been.

At her death the grandfather of Merze had written, offering to adopt and educate her child. The letter, a cold, condescending epistle, with a contempt for her father showing through every line, was given by him to Merze to read.

"There, child, read that ; they have money, and will make a lady of you, and the prospects are small for me doing it. You are almost fourteen, and have sense ahead of your years. See what they offer, and choose for yourself."

He said this carelessly, handing her the letter with a hand that trembled. He had never known before how much the girl was to him.

Her eyes shone with eagerness as she read. It was not the thought of fine ladyhood that made her long for what

the letter offered, but that of an education—a chance of school with no fear of being taken from it with every change in her father's fortune. The expression of her face showed him her thoughts, and his own grew white as he said: "You will go?"

His voice broke in on her dreams. She noted the pain underlying his matter-of-fact words, and, with a rush of memory, came her mother's last request to her:

"Try to be kind to dada, Merze. Do what you can to make him happy, for he has only you, now, in all the world." Thus she thought of her poor, pale little mother, who had loved them both so much. She wanted the books—yes—but—

"I will stay here," she said, giving back the letter.

"Merze! Merze! You mean it?" he asked, with a sound like a sob in his strong, brown throat.

"Of course I mean it."

"And, by heavens, you shan't regret it! You shall see, Merze. I'll get out of this rut, and then you shall have the things they offer you. I will do so much——"

"There, dada, don't make rash promises, for you always break them. Don't say anything more to me about it—only tell them I won't go." And, calling the dogs, she ran a merry race with them until she reached her favorite nook by the trees at the spring, and then, when out of sight of the house, she flung herself among the grasses in a passion of sobs that shuddered through all her slight frame.

The dogs, surprised at this new departure of their playmate, were at first inclined to think it some trick for their amusement, and ran romping over her; but, seeing her lie unheeding all their endeavors at playfulness, they ceased, and stood about gazing at her with soft, wide

eyes of wonder. One, a particular pet of hers, a glossy-coated, velvet-eared setter, came over and, scratching softly at her dress, put his nose down by her neck and stood quite still. Receiving no notice from her, he lay flat on the ground, with both paws on her arm, and ever and anon gave her a gentle push as if to remind her of his presence.

"Don't, Max!" she said, chokingly; but, feeling him still there, she raised her head and met the sad, wise eyes with a devotion in them seldom seen in the eyes of a human; and then she drew the brown head close to her own, and sobbed out her sorrows to her mute friend.

"Oh, Max! Max! Will it ever be different? Will the learning and the books ever come? Will anyone *ever* understand?"

Max crawled close, offering his sympathy in a pitying, dumb manner, as if knowing and understanding that words were of no avail here. Max was as old, almost, as Merze herself, and had, perhaps, seen other hearts cry out in loveless loneliness. Dogs hear so much and see so many sorrows in the people about them of which husband and wife, parent and child, do not dream. "Only a dog," we say, and let it lie in our rooms unheeded. And, when our friends are gone and there are no human eyes near from which to hide our thoughts, our loves, our hopes, our despair, then we take out the treasured likeness of a face we love, the scribbled note whose writer's name is always first in our hearts but seldom on our lips—dead leaves that drift from the past and bring the flowers of the present. And over them all, how many tried souls have moaned: "How long! how long!" And a few hours later, when we go out among those about us, laughing and jesting, we see the sad, ques-

tioning eyes of our dog watching us, and never think that he may be asking mutely: "Which is yourself: the tired soul that prayed for release last night, or the careless devotee of society to-day?"

CHAPTER II.

A week after our introduction to the log cabin and its curious occupants, one of them, accompanied by Max, made her way along the shady path through the woods and across lots to the Homestead, as it was called, where lived Mr. Halbert, the gentleman for whom her father worked, taking care of the horses, or seeing that the stablemen did it, for his knowledge of horse-breeding and training made him a valuable man to the landowner and connoisseur in racing stock.

There were many days on which Jack Mignot found himself unable to get around to the stables, and this happened to be one of them, and Merze, as usual, was sent with directions to the hostlers. She walked past the house and through the yard toward the stables with the air of one who is familiar with her surroundings.

"Hen!" she called in through the open door of the granery.

"Yes, miss," and a black figure emerged with a wooden pail of oats in his hand.

"He can't come this morning, and you're to take Starlight out yourself, and not let Jim do it, and have new boxes made for Whitefoot's stall, and don't let the carriage horses go out without having that shoe tightened on the one he spoke to you about, and turn the young stock out in the lower pasture."

"Yes, miss. Is that all?"

"That's all, and—and you'll see it's all done, Hen, so that Mr. Halbert won't miss him being away?"

"Bless your heart, honey—yes; you trust Hen to 'tend to it; I understand."

A red wave passed over the girl's face at the darkey's well-meaning words, under which she detected a shade of pity she could not resent.

"Thank you, Hen," she said, turning away.

"Blest if I wouldn't tell lies hand over fist sooner than have that little girl fretted fear he'd be discharged," muttered Hen to the peck measure as he turned into the granery.

As Merze passed the stable a cheery voice called: "Good-morning, Merze," and looking up she saw a boyish face smiling down at her from the hay-mow.

"Good-morning, sir," she said, not stopping.

"Here—wait, I want to speak to you. What's the hurry?" and the figure of a young fellow of perhaps eighteen leaped lightly to the ground and in a moment was beside her. "Where have you been? I haven't seen you for a week."

"At home, minding my own business," answered the girl, shortly, walking so rapidly that he was compelled to hurry to keep pace with her.

"Which is not a very elegant intimation that I am to mind mine," he added, not at all crushed by this chilling reply. "Say, are you training for a foot-race? If not, you might as well slack up a little, for I shan't let you walk away from me until I'm through talking to you, for I go back to school to-day. There, that's better. Now, tell me why you didn't come for the book you wanted so much."

The girl walked on in silence.

"Well?" he inquired.

"I changed my mind," she said, with her eyes on the ground.

"Oh, have you? Well, that alters things. So my getting it is of no use after all, for I don't lean towards Grecian history myself."

"Oh, Glenn! did you get it?" the girl broke out, eagerly.

He looked at her, marking the longing in her eyes.

"So you did not change your mind? I thought not. Now tell me why you neglected coming for the book when you wanted it so much."

"I won't," she said, sullenly.

"Oh, all right! but don't look sulky about it; and here is your treasure," he said, handing her a neatly-bound copy of Grecian mythology, which she took eagerly.

"You are *so* good," she uttered, in an ecstatic tremor of gratitude and excitement. "I wanted it so long—a real whole new one! I am so glad, and he shan't laugh at me this time. I'll hide it."

"So! someone laughed at you? Who was it?"

"Dada."

"And what at?"

"Me, and I made up my mind I'd never go near your house again"—in her gladness she had forgotten her resolve not to tell him—"for when I told him you loaned me books and taught me some things in them he—he—"

"Well, what did he say?"

"Nothing."

"What?"

"But—he laughed."

The girl hesitated over the statement, as if there had been something very annoying to her in her father's laugh. But the boy did not notice that; he only thought what a sulky vixen she was to deny herself the book through ill-temper with her father, and laughed at her, too, boyishly—carelessly.

"What a calamity! He dared to laugh at you? We'll have him drawn and quartered straightway. Oh! what a life you must lead him. By the way, where is the jovial Jack? Why did he not come over himself?"

She hesitated, her face flushing; she looked at him, and saw an amused smile on his face. That settled it. She set her teeth determinedly and lied heroically.

"He's sick."

"Poor man!" this with just a trifle more sympathy than was required, Merze thought. "Are you sure he isn't drunk?"

She stopped, her eyes filled with angry tears.

"You think it is very funny, don't you?" she asked, bitterly. "I wonder if you would see the funny side of it if you were in my place? I've had fine clothes and money like you, but I never wore them and laughed at people who were wretched. You only talk to me so you can laugh and make fun of me, and I hate you, Glenn Halbert!" And, dashing the coveted Grecian mythology within an inch of his nose, she sped across the road and into the woods toward her home, while he stood stupidly staring after her.

"Now, I wonder what I said to bring out so much temper. Everybody knows Jack drinks, and she knows they do. So I can't see—well, I think I will give up trying to educate the natives," and, picking up the book, he was turning toward the house when a man called

out from the edge of the woods: "Good-morning, Glenn."

"Hello, Drande, out so early? What did you get?"

"Nothing," answered the other, crossing the road, his gun on his shoulder; "not a thing did I see except chipmunks and a wild-looking girl who ran into me back there, nearly upsetting me. Do you know her?"

"To my sorrow; she just left me in a rage at a trifle—an awful temper—flung that book at my head and ran."

"Grecian mythology! What on earth was a wild-looking thing of that sort doing with a copy of this?"

"Oh, she's a sort of an oddity with a smattering of all sorts of knowledge, and a father who is a good match for her. He looks after the stables when he happens to be sober. If it wasn't that he knows Starlight so well, and is training her for the fall races, father would discharge him, though it would be hard on the girl if he did, and she's good-hearted though she has a temper," added the boy.

He walked back toward the house with his companion, a man whom he was no more like than the slim, straight fruit tree with a hint of its first blossoms is like one in its prime that has been kissed by the sun and rocked by the winds until the branches bear leaves on which the frosts of autumn are beginning to paint the emblems of a life that has lived every hour of its existence. A decidedly handsome face, with full dark eyes in which there was a glint of latent mockery; a square chin, expressive mouth, and a length of upper lip under the dark moustache showing enough strength of will to balance the easy, cynical good nature of his Bohemian countenance. A man of perhaps thirty-five, with that indescribable something which speaks to the most ignorant of the

man of culture, and of the sort that is not gained so much from books as from contact with the people of many climes.

A rolling stone may gather no moss, but it certainly acquires a polish—such a polish as made itself manifest to those meeting this man whom Glenn had called "Drande."

CHAPTER III.

On through the woods went Merze, with angry tears in her eyes blurring the path at times, and turning all the summer landscape into a confused mass of blue and green.

"I will never go there again—never! He only laughs at me because my clothes are ragged and we are poor. I—I hate him, yes, I do!" she muttered between decided snivels. "I guess my eyes are too red to go home; if dada thought anyone had made me cry he'd want to go up and whip them all until he found the right one. Guess I'll lay down here in the shade until I quit making a fool of myself. I don't believe I've got much sense anyway; and now I don't suppose I'll ever get that book again, and I wanted it so bad—oh, dear!" and the tears were very near the surface again, but she kept them back heroically, and settled herself in a grassy hollow made by the upheaved roots of a storm-leveled chestnut.

"Dada will swear if I'm not back to get his dinner," she thought, scratching together some leaves for a pillow. "Well, let him—wish I had a book to read," but that thought brought back the Grecian mythology to her mind. That way lay madness in the shape of red eyes,

so Merze avoided it. "Let him swear. I won't go back till evening. Wonder who that man was I bumped into back there? He looked like a picture we had in a book of poems—King Arthur of the Round Table. I wonder if Glenn knows him? I wish there were fairies here; old Mike in Natchez used to swear there were in Ireland—wish I could get some bad ones to do something to Glenn Halbert, something real wicked, 'cause I hate him—I hate—" and the tawny head slipped heavily off her arm onto the pillow of dry leaves, and Merze was sound asleep with disjointed mutterings of hate and Glenn Halbert on her lips.

The night before that had been almost sleepless for her. Morning was fast approaching when Jack had stumbled into the cabin, drunk, and had dropped down on the covered boxes unconscious of two tired eyes watching him from behind the curtain of the little bedroom.

"Did I waken you coming in last night?" he asked in the morning. "It must have been late—almost eleven."

"I suppose I was sleeping too sound," she answered, with a contempt for him filling her mind. She had not slept at all until he came—an hour before dawn.

And so, tired and tearful, sleep came to her quickly laying there among the grass and leaves, and the birds twittered about her, and the grey squirrels peered at her from shady nooks, and the sun reached its highest point in the heavens and began slowly descending when she moved restlessly and stretched out her hand, touching something soft and warm.

"Max," she murmured sleepily, "good Max!" and raising her head she met the friendly gaze of Max, and beyond Max she encountered another pair of eyes—not

the dog's, but eyes with a gleam of quizzical wonder in them, belonging to the face which she thought looked like King Arthur's. Beside him was a portable easel and a box with paints and brushes in it, showing that he had been making use of them.

Merze lay still in the little hollow looking at him. "Well?" she said at last, as he sat there looking at her but saying nothing.

"Well," he answered, sending rings of smoke from a queer Turkish-looking pipe.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, superciliously, as if the estate was her own special property.

"May it please your highness, I am a poor vagabond stealing a few sketches from your domain," he answered, meekly, wondering if she would understand his words.

"Are you an artist—really?" she asked, doubtfully, crawling from her leafy couch.

"Well," he answered, "some people say I am not, but I attribute that, of course, to jealousy. You know—or you may not know, but it is a fact—that envy always sends her shafts at a brilliant mark, and I, alas! am too often the butt of her malice; but genius will not be crushed, so I live on to brighten with my gifts a thankless world."

Merze stopped in her work of picking the leaves from her hair, and looked at him with questioning, displeased eyes.

"Are you drunk?" she asked, bluntly.

Her words, and the fearless way in which they were spoken, made the man laugh—a low, pleasant, mellow laugh that reassured her, for she laughed with him.

"Well," she said, half crossly, "how was I to know? You talked as if you were either drunk or else hadn't

real good sense, and some way you look as if you ought to have sense, so I just thought you were drunk."

"A very natural conclusion, my young philosopher; your breadth of vision is only equaled by the delicacy with which you veil your compliments. Come and look at my work. I was at least not too tipsy to get a very decent copy of your face."

She looked at the sketch he turned toward her, a picture fair enough to please the vanity of any female in which that trait is supposed to be paramount, and this is what she saw: A background of green foilage with the sun warm against it. An overturned tree lying there so long that the gigantic roots had been washed by the rains and burned by the sun until all soil had disappeared, and their blackened lengths, reaching high in air, looked like the arms of an immense devil-fish; and, curled at its base beneath its grotesque shadow, she saw herself—but it was herself idealized, made more fair. Perhaps it was because the eyes were closed that she looked so childish—her eyes were always too old for her face. Her tawny hair shone like a halo against the brown leaves of her pillow. A loose sacque, evidently made by her own unskilled fingers out of red merino, was around her slight figure, and was the one thing needed to brighten the foreground of the sketch. Very roughly it had been done, and very much there was still to do at it. Only on the face had he worked carefully as possible in the time given him, and like a star it shone in its sombre setting of dead leaves.

He watched the girl with curiosity in his eyes. What did he expect her to do or say—admire her own likeness in woman fashion? If so, he was disappointed. She looked at it earnestly, but said nothing.

"Well?" he said, a little impatiently.

"Oh!" she breathed, more to herself than to him; "if I could only do so well!"

He took the pipe from his lips as he glanced at her face, and saw in it such a longing—such a starved look in the wide eyes—that for a moment he was startled out of his laziness.

"Do you mean that you want to learn to paint?"

She sat still, looking at the sketch, her hands clasped tightly over her knee.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, a little weakly—a little irritably. "Just to be able to do something in the world that is really worth doing. Sometimes I try to keep myself from thinking of it, and once I thought I'd quit trying to learn when there was no chance of me ever going to school again. It's awful to know just a little, and be sure you'll never have a chance to learn any more; so I took my books and buried them down in the ground, and tried to lose the place, but I couldn't. I went back in the night for them; I couldn't sleep. Dada says I'm a fool about them, but I can't help it, and that picture brings it all back more than ever."

"Brings what back?" he asked. She was such a curious creature, with her earnest face a little sulky—or was it only hopeless dissatisfaction with herself? At any rate, she was a curious type, and rather an interesting one to the lazy-looking sketcher. Her words seemed strange to him, coming from the lips of a child. "Brings what back?" he repeated, as she sat silent.

"Ah!" she burst out, "everything: the want of books and the learning to understand them; real pictures like that; and words to tell of all the beautiful things I see and hear in the woods and fields—things that people who

are clever write such poems of. How can I tell you all it brings back or how lonesome it makes me? You'll think, as it is, that I am a fool. Dada says I am. Sometimes I wonder if I am quite like other folks!" She said this so earnestly—even wistfully—that the man had no thought of laughing at the odd speech.

"And what conclusion do you reach as to your sanity?"

She laughed a little at the question.

"I don't know," she answered. "I only know if I could do work as great as that I would never feel lonely again—not if I never saw the face of a living thing. Just to do any work so well I would be content."

The man smiled a little sadly on the young enthusiast, and replied :

"You think so now, child," turning the picture where her eyes could no longer rest on it; "but you would know better in time. It never yet has contented humanity, especially when the human thing has a woman's heart filled with longings such as yours—for knowledge, the secrets of art, the speech of a poet ; and you would want these to yourself,with only the forests—no human hearts —to share it with : that would mean selfishness, and it is not to such lives that God grants the things you long for."

His voice was no longer light or careless—his eyes no longer mocking. To the girl he seemed more like her pictured King Arthur than ever. No one had ever spoken to her of it before. Even her mother had scolded a little, weakly, at what she called silly vagaries; only this stranger seemed to understand and did not laugh.

"I wish," she said, impulsively, "that you were always here. Just to hear you talk would teach me so much. I

can't give you anything in return, but I could show you every pretty spot in the woods for your pictures."

"I would be glad to see them, though it is too late now, as I leave in the morning for the East. But are you aware that, despite our lengthy conversation, we are ignorant of each other's names?"

"Mine is 'Merze,'" she answered, promptly.

"'Merze!' But that is a nickname; what is your real name?"

"Just 'Merze—Merze Mignot'; I never had any other. Dada used to have a dog by that name; he says he called me for it, but I don't know if it's true. Ma wanted me called after some of her folks, and I guess he just called me after the dog to be contrary."

She told him as unconcernedly as if it was an every-day occurrence to find names for children in that way. She did not in the least understand how strange it sounded to her listener. The dogs had always been her best friends; she would quite as soon be named for them as any of the people she knew. But her words of explanation were as a history to the man, and the statement, "He just called me for the dog, to be contrary," told of family contentions that were not trifling.

"Poor devil!" the man muttered under his breath; and then aloud, "well, Merze, how is it that you are so dissatisfied with your life? It seems to suit the other people whom I see here."

"The other people!" He could not but smile at her tone. "Where are the other girls brought up as I have been? how could I be the same?"

"You forget, child, I haven't known you an hour, and am ignorant of your manner of bringing up."

"Oh, well, I can soon tell you," offered Merze, com-

posedly. "I've been carted all over the country, wherever dada happened to go looking for a streak of luck. Sometimes he would find it, and then we had everything; but it never lasted long. He put me to school two or three times, but he was sure to strike bad luck. That would settle it; so I only got a little taste of learning when they'd take me away, and maybe give up a nice place for a flatboat on which we would float down to New Orleans; and sometimes we had to sell even my books. I never minded about the furniture, or clothes, and such things. It used to worry mama; but all I cared for was when the books had to go. I've gathered up a few now, but all they teach me only makes me want more; and now I don't expect ever to get any more chance to learn. Things have been pretty bad with us since mama died a year ago. I wonder why people were ever put into this world when there don't seem to be any room or any chance for them?"

"Don't despair; you are young enough yet to begin your education. Something may send a chance of it in your way."

"I am fifteen, and the chance seems a long time in coming. I don't think it strange that I am not like other people here—people who have good, quiet homes, and have always known at night that they were sure of a breakfast in the morning. And as for a chance of school—when I can't buy shoes, how am I to buy books?" and she laughed a little bitterly as she thrust out a torn shoe that had evidently been repaired by her own hands. Instinctively the man put his hand in his pocket. The girl saw it, and, rising, continued:

"But I never begged. Come, Max."

The man sprang to his feet. "Stop!" he said, put-

ting his hand out. "Stop one moment. I beg your pardon, child. Surely you know I would not offer you money as to a beggar!"

"Oh, I don't know," answered the girl resentfully; "perhaps you are like the rest after all. They think all people ever want is money. It's good enough for me, too, for I had no business talking to you so. It is more than I have ever told even the people I've known longest. I was a fool. You looked kind and strong, like an engraving we had of King Arthur. I went to sleep there and dreamed of you, and when I woke and saw you it almost seemed as if I knew you before, and so I talked—and perhaps you laughed!—how do I know?"

Her voice had been gradually rising, until it had reached a pitch several degrees above an ordinary conversational tone. "And I wish I had never seen you —or that," with an unconsciously dramatic gesture toward the poor picture. "I hope I never will again. You and your work make me hate everything about myself; and you think me nothing more than a beggar in spite of the kind things you said; and I hate you for it —yes I do—I hate you!" She looked such a young fury that the man stared at her in amazement. The dog seemed to know her humors, for he crawled close to her feet and whined a little, low and pleadingly.

The man looked at her, shaking his head chidingly. "Child, child," he said, sadly, "if you have your own faults so little under control, you have cause to be thankful for anything that makes you dissatisfied with your own nature. Come, sit here; I want to talk with you."

The girl did so with drooping head and eyes on the ground. She was thoroughly ashamed of her temper, and half awed by his tone.

"I want to speak to you," he continued. "You said just now it would teach you much if I could talk to you often. I may never have the chance of talking to you again, but I want to tell you some things which you must try and remember for your own good. You are ambitious, in a vague way, to do something which will be thought great. You see that sketch, and by contrast with your own work and surroundings you think it is so, and you long for such accomplishments; but you will learn some day your mistake. That may be cleverly done—barely that—a thing to pass pleasant hours with, but not a thing that will leave behind the consciousness of good work well done. So, child, that is not a thing to grieve over for not knowing."

"But it is beautiful," she said, "and I can not do anything."

"But there is that in your nature, if you strive to improve it, that will bring more content to your future than such superficial accomplishments."

"What is it?" she asked, eagerly; "is it anything that may be great?"

"Great, great?" he repeated, looking at the questioning, eager eyes; "you think only of something that might be thought great. There is something which in woman is more honor than greatness."

"What is it?" she asked again.

"It is goodness," he answered; and, watching her face, he saw the expectation die out of it, leaving only disappointment.

"Goodness, oh!" she said ambiguously; "there are lots of people that."

"And so you do not care to be," he added; "as I feared, your longings are only for the tinsel which you hope

the world may mistake for gold. Ah! that is but a paltry ambition. The world is full of such; it is a waste of words to talk of it," and he rose with almost a disappointed look in his eyes.

She rose, too, and looked at him while he gathered up his paints and brushes; which done, he turned to her, holding out his hand.

"Good-bye," he said kindly. "I am sorry to have added to your troubles by my presence and my work; but I will not again. I leave to-morrow." She laid her hand in his, but did not speak. "Good-bye," he repeated.

She tried to speak, hesitated, and then burst out: "I am sorry—I did not mean it that way—I will try to be good, or whatever you say, if only you don't go away angry."

He dropped the brushes and took both her hands in his.

"I am not angry with you, child; don't think that; a little disappointed, perhaps; but your heart is all right, though you must try to be good for the sake of goodness, not to please another."

"No one has ever cared but you," she answered; "no one ever tried to teach me how, and I guess folks don't just grow good. But I will try if you will only teach me what you mean."

"I only mean that you must place the word 'good' instead of the word 'great' first in your heart, and it will bring you no regrets with your womanhood. You are dreaming your days away in air-castles while you neglect the one thing that is really yours—a tiny garden in which you allow the weeds to grow until they grow so tall and so strong that your fingers will soon be too

weak to break them. And low down in the dusk at their roots shine little white stars that one sees seldom for the waving, flourishing arms of the weeds above. They are the snowdrops of pure thoughts, unselfish desires, and consciousness of duties well done."

"Tell me what to do," said Merze, her hands still in his. They had been so earnest, he in speaking, she in listening, that they had forgotten.

"Curb your temper; endeavor to do always what duty brings to you, if you would make good use of your life. Your home does not seem pleasant to you—are you always pleasant to it? Strive for the snowdrops always; dig out the first green shafts of the weeds. If you try faithfully to conquer and improve your nature, and prove that you have an earnest desire for knowledge, and not the vanity that longs for superficial accomplishments, it may be that sometime I could help your father in the matter of your education. I can, at any rate, send you such school books as you need for the present, and for the future will hope for the best."

"I will study and try so hard," she promised; "and you will come back sometime soon?"

"I cannot promise that; but you shall have your books, and then, if you are earnest as you say, we will see what can be done about the school."

"Are you rich?" she asked bluntly.

"No, far from it; but I might manage to get the money loaned until your father could pay it back in part. But I will see him and talk to him about it."

"No, you won't!" said Merze, decidedly; "so that settles that. He won't pay anything back unless it's to someone he wants to borrow from again. He'd say he'd pay you, of course; but he never would do it in the

world. If you were rich enough to wait until I could learn how to earn the money, I could pay it; but as you ain't, why we can't, that's all. And I won't think of it, and then I won't be disappointed. But it is good of you to say you would try. Nobody was ever so kind to me before, or seemed to care whether I was good or bad. Mama was always good enough, but she wasn't strongly good—not enough, you know, to help make other people good. But I'll try to be so now, because you care. Why do you care?"

"Why did you tell me more of your life than you would tell others?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said, laughingly; "it does seem funny, don't it? I guess it was because I dreamed of you, and it almost seemed as if I had known you. But it is sundown, and I must go home. Dada will swear as it is, for I haven't been home since morning. Won't I see you again before you go away?" she asked, as she held out her hand.

"Perhaps," he answered, smiling. "Who can tell what a day may bring forth?"

"I wish it would bring a streak of good luck, so we could get out of this place."

"And if you should go before I return—if I should not see you again—you will remember the things I told you, and you will not forget the snowdrops?"

His tone was half jesting, half serious, but there was no answering smile in the girl's eyes.

"You will see that I don't forget," she said earnestly.

A step was heard in the woods above them, and a voice called: "Hello there!"

They looked up; a man had stopped a few rods off and was looking at them.

"Well?" answered Merze's companion, "what is wanted?"

"I want to find Jack Mignot's house. Can you direct me?"

"I'll show you," said Merze. "I'm going there." Then she turned to her new-found friend. "I must go now, sure. I don't know who it is, but it's lucky he came, or I'd have stayed until dark. Good-bye once more. Come, Max," and then she joined the new-comer. "Come along," she said, brusquely, and in a minute more they had passed out of sight of the man standing by the overturned chestnut. He picked up his painting outfit and the picture, and turned in the opposite direction.

"I wonder," he said, as he plunged through the woods, "whether I have done a more foolish thing than usual this afternoon. But the girl's eyes had such a look of starvation in their depths, and I always was a fool over a pair of wistful eyes—bigger fool I! What business have I with such a vagabond's welfare?—I who saddle myself with the responsibility of a girl's education, a stray of very erratic propensities, a bundle of contradictions such as is only encased in the form divine. According to the almanac, I was thirty-two my last birthday, but from my action I am tempted to believe that my second childhood is fast approaching. Well, fools will learn in no school save experience."

CHAPTER IV.

Merze walked on silently beside the stranger. She was thinking, thinking over the words so lately spoken to her—words such as no other had ever used to her—words that had filled all her mind with a desire to be what the speaker wished her. She wondered vaguely how he understood her wants and needs and the evil that was always uppermost in her own nature.

Her companion looked at her curiously. Once or twice he spoke to her, but she answered briefly. At any other time she would have welcomed anyone to talk to, especially a man like this, who was very different from the generality of Jack's callers—a man well dressed, and with the air of a gentleman; small hands, on one of which shone a ring, an opal surrounded by diamonds; blue eyes with a keen glint in them, the keenness of steel and the coldness; light-brown hair, and a fair, rather florid face, with a foreshadowing in it of future obesity—a handsome face, he had heard it called often, so often that he carried the consciousness of it in his manner as he strolled along the wood path with a rather jaunty air.

"I am afraid I am taking you out of your way," he remarked; "if so, direct me and I will try and find it alone."

"No, you are not," she answered. "I am going home anyway. I live there."

"You do? Then you must be Jack's girl."

"Yes, I am Jack's girl."

"Let me see, I ought to remember your name; 'Mercy' is it not? But when I saw you last, you were a little mite, and you are almost a lady now."

"A lady!" Merze said, glancing down at the old shoes, and then up into his face to see if he were mocking her. But she saw nothing to corroborate her suspicion, as he looked all right, though she felt no inclination to be sociable or friendly, as she did with the man of the Turkish pipe. "My name is 'Merze,'" she continued, "but I don't know you."

"Possibly not," said the other, airily. "I did not expect you would; but Jack will. Jack is not the sort to forget a friend, and we used to be great chums in the old days. And to think he has a daughter so near grown up! It makes me feel old."

But he evidently carried his age lightly as possible; so Merze thought as she wondered who he was, this man who seemed a gentleman, and who yet avowed a friendship of long standing with Jack.

Gentlemen she had remembered coming to their house long ago when she was smaller, and they lived in cities; but the same ones never came very long. One she would see for weeks, night after night, and then he would stop, and she would never see him again; but another would soon take his place, and be hail-fellow well-met with Jack. She often wondered where they all went.

Once there was one who had come often—a young man with the freshness of the hills in his face—from the Alleghenies, he had told her one day when he brought her a toy-box decorated with porcupine quills that had come from his home in the mountains. He told her

much of the lovely old homestead where his father lived, and where the woodman worked through the white winter in the pine woods, cutting trees to send down with the freshets in the spring. An only son he was, just through school, in St. Louis on business for his father, and Jack was showing him the sights, and trying to make him feel at home—so he told her, and she knew no more. But after awhile the light began fading from the boy's face ; he was irritable, and had no more pretty stories to tell her. And then there came a day when she fell asleep under the sofa in Jack's room, and was wakened by voices. One was that of the boy from the pine country.

"You don't know what this means to me, Mignot," he said. "It is ruin !"

"Oh, nonsense, my boy !" said Jack ; "don't take it so much to heart. If I had known they allowed any regular card-sharpers in the place we never would have entered it. I am cut up over it myself, but I am sure you know I did my best for you."

"I try to believe you did," answered the boy. His words were few, but the tone went to Merze's heart. It was so full of utter despair.

"Come, come," said Jack, "don't speak like that. You are not yourself to-day, and small wonder, for the loss was a pretty heavy one ; but your father is not likely to be hard on you. Lie down and rest until I come back, and then you can write him a letter." Jack lit a cigar and sauntered out of the room, and the boy, unconscious of Merze, dropped his head on the table, and she could hear him whispering over the word "Father, father, father."

Nothing else could she distinguish ; but, in peeping

from under the sofa, she saw him take a small, shining, pretty thing from his pocket and lay it before him. He sat looking at it, whispering over and over that one name until the child cried silently in sympathy, not knowing why—only the tears would sweep up to her eyes at the sight of his face, it was so white, and at the sound of his voice, it was so different. He arose and walked to the window, and stood looking out on the passing people while Merze almost held her breath. She was afraid; there was something in it all that terrified her. She watched him turn and walk back to the table. He picked up the shining thing and held it so she could see, and then she knew what it was, for she had seen Jack's—only Jack's was not so small or so pretty. Once more she heard him whisper that name of "father" as he raised the shining thing to his head; and then a child's scream caused him to drop it.

She sprang to him, clasping her arms about him, kissing his face, and trying to get his hands in her two little ones, as if by holding them was the only way she could be sure of no harm to him. Her kisses seemed to take the rigidness from his lips, and finally he laid his cheek close to hers, and she could feel tears on her face that were not her own. Finally he became more calm, and succeeded in quieting her sobs that had made her almost hysterical; but all the time she had kept her eyes on the shining thing on the floor. He noticed it and, picking it up, took from it little bits of lead, and then gave it to her.

"It has no danger in it now," he said; "keep it for a plaything. I do not want to see it. And now good-bye, child. If you ever see me again, I hope it will be when I am a better man. And I *will* be if he only forgives me this once—the first time in my life to bring him trouble."

Then he kissed her with some words of blessing on his lips, and she never saw him again. He was the only one of Jack's many friends of whose departure she had known anything. The others had all quit coming silently. And she wondered now, looking at this fair, courteous man, how he had gone, for he was the only one she had ever known to come back.

"Yes," he was saying, "you have brought an added sense of age to me, Miss Merze. To think of Jack Mignot's having a grown-up daughter! By-the-way, I thought it was Jack himself in the woods when I first saw you—the man is rather the same build. Was it a neighbor of yours—what name?"

"I don't know where he lives or his name;" and then it dawned on her that the stranger had forgotten to enlighten her on that point. "I don't know his name," she added.

"Ah!"

That was all he said; but there can be so much condensed meaning in that little word, and Merze felt her face grow hot.

"Do you think I lie?" she asked, darting a black look at his slightly-smiling visage. He saw how angry she was, but the indignation was very becoming to the gray eyes that changed and darkened as an April day—just so threatening while it lasted, and just as sure to lighten again; for clouds rest so lightly on young mouths and young faces. The man knew this, and smiled as he looked at her.

"Lie? my dear Miss Merze, of course not. True, your acquaintance did seem of long standing from the fervor of the hand-clasp; but as I remarked before, I must be getting old. My eyesight may be failing. I

may not have seen the hand-clasp at all. Of course I did not since you say you don't know the man."

"I didn't say I didn't know him," she said, shortly.

He looked at her half-sulky face and made no answer; but his smile did not lessen as he walked on jauntily beside her, whistling half under his breath "Scenes that are brightest." Merze did not know what the air was, but all her life she hated it, and never heard it without a remembrance of the sun sinking over the southern hills, and those two walking together over the grassy path toward the log house.

CHAPTER V.

"There is the house," said Merze, as they reached the fence at the edge of the woods, "and there is dada," as she saw Jack coming from the spring with a bucket of water.

"So it is," assented the stranger as he leaped lightly over the low fence. "Give me your hand, Miss Merze—so!" as she stepped down beside him. "By-the-way," he added, carelessly, "did that gentleman back there in the woods seem to recognize me?"

"You?" exclaimed Merze; "why, no. Do you know him?"

"No; after all I believe not. It was evidently only a slight resemblance to a man I have seen. I think you said he was not a neighbor."

"No, he is a stranger."

She longed to ask more, but they were now within speaking distance of the house. Jack, standing on the doorstep, looked at them intently, and Merze saw his

face brighten as she had never seen it do at sight of any man.

"Well, Jack, how goes it?" said the other, speaking first.

"My God!" In a stride Jack was beside him, their hands clasped, his arm around the other's shoulder.

"Fred Lawrence at last—after all these years. It seems too good to be true!"

"But it is, old fellow," said the new-comer with unruffled demeanor. Jack showed his gladness in his face, in his voice, and in the hearty, repeated hand-shakings. Lawrence was no doubt glad too, but he showed nothing. The smile was in his eyes still, but it had neither grown nor lessened. It was the same as when he walked by her side whistling. Merze felt half angry toward him and toward Jack as well. She walked past them both and entered the house. The fire was out and supper was to get, and Merze could see it was for three instead of two. As she entered with some chips Jack called her. The two men had sat down on a bench outside the door

"What do you want?" she asked, rather shortly.

"Come here," answered Jack. She went over to him, her hands full of pine knots and chips. "Merze," he said, "this is Mr. Lawrence, the best friend your dada ever had in his life."

"Oh, come now!" interrupted Lawrence; "that is putting it rather strong."

"Not a bit of it," replied Jack. "When a man gives up his only chance of life to a friend, I don't think there can be words found strong enough."

"But I did not give up my only chance; you see I am living yet."

"You thought it was your only chance when you gave

up that piece of spar off the Mexican coast, when the men in the sinking ship were fighting like wolves over every loose plank. Fred, not one man in a thousand would have done it."

"Perhaps I should not have done so either had I not been an expert swimmer, and known every inch of the coast," said Fred, carelessly. "And then," he added, "if you remember, Jack, life hadn't much that was attractive to me just then."

"I remember," Jack said, laying his hand on the other's shoulder, half as if in sympathy, Merze thought. Then, after a pause, he asked: "Is she living?"

"Yes."

Merze looked at him. His eyes were seemingly intent on following the rings of smoke floating heavenwards from his cigar. Something in his tone as he answered belied his careless manner, and, for the first time, Merze felt more kindly toward him. Dropping the pine knots she held out her hand to him :

"I am glad you have come, Mr. Lawrence; not so glad as dada, perhaps, but——"

"There, there!" interrupted Lawrence, "don't spoil it; never mind the degrees of gladness. I am thankful for even that first concession, for you most assuredly were not glad to meet me back there in the woods, and some of your glances as we came along were anything but gladsome," he added, quizzically.

Merze laughed a little guiltily, but said nothing.

"Was she sulky?" asked Jack, not understanding. "She mostly is. How did you come to show him the way?"

Lawrence answered before Merze could get a chance: "I met her in the woods back there and asked the way.

She volunteered to show me, hence our arrival together. Here, Miss Merze, let me help you with that wood."

"I can do it myself," she answered, "and my name is not 'Miss'; it is just 'Merze.'"

Jack laughed. "That is Merze all over; no nonsense about her."

"All right, 'Merze' it is, then," answered Lawrence, picking up the wood she had left and carrying it in after her. "Where shall I put it?" he asked, standing in the middle of the room, and with a quiet glance taking an inventory of its contents.

"There," she said, with a nod toward the chips on the hearth. She was on her knees, breaking bits of bark on some live coals, and fanning them with her hat.

He dropped the pine knots and stood looking at her. "Why don't you thank me?" he asked, mockingly.

Her face flushed slightly. Was it from the blaze of the bark, or the consciousness of the unspoken agreement that the unknown man in the woods was not to be mentioned? Looking up she saw the quizzical light in his eyes. He had seen a touch of her temper, and it amused him to arouse it; but if his intent was to tease her she checkmated him.

"Oh, yes," she answered, with suspicious sweetness. "I forget my manners very often; you will soon learn that. But it is very kind of you to bring in the wood. Thank you."

The man stared at her a second as she proceeded to fill the tea-kettle and hang it on the crane as if unconscious of his presence; and then he turned and walked out of the door with a bar of "Scenes that are brightest" whistled in a minor key by lips that were twitching with suppressed laughter.

"Jack," he said, as he again sat himself beside the other on the bench, "that girl of yours is a character, a cool one."

"So you've found that out already, have you ?" asked Jack. "You always had a knack of reading people, and you've struck it this time. If you had to live in the house with her, you'd find she is not always a pleasant character—not too much of the angel about her."

"I should judge not. But do you intend to bring her up in this place? Rather a drop, isn't it, old fellow ?"

"Curse it, yes! But what is a man to do? I have got into this rut, and can't get out of it. Her mother is buried over the hill there—that was a year ago. It's hard on Merze, for she is one of the sort that wants books and schooling and what not, and the chances look mighty dubious now for her ever getting them. I hardly make enough to keep things going—barely that."

"Perhaps I can help you to more. That is what I came for."

"Do you mean it, Fred ?" and Jack's voice was very eager. It had been so long since a man in Lawrence's set had cared to know whether he was living or dead, and now that this one had remembered—had hunted him up—seemed too good to be true. Their friendship years ago had been undoubted ; but years make such a difference. This Jack had learned, and ceased to hope ; and now Lawrence had dropped down in this out-of-the way place as if from the skies—just as calm, careless, and nonchalant as ever, and not a day older, it seemed to Jack, who had, in the years, grown away from him. But then Fred had always been too cool a hand to dissipate, and Jack showed in his face that he had not been so.

"Of course I mean it. If you want to earn a five-hundred-dollar bill, I am going to give you the chance to do it."

"Five hundred dollars! It would be a God-send to me now."

"So I supposed, and the work will not be hard. You have charge of Halbert's stock, haven't you?"

"Yes; what do you want?"

"That young mare, Starlight, is talked of as having good stuff in her. How much money would you sink on her in the fall races beside the stock that is known will be there?"

"Every dollar I had in the world," said Jack, decidedly. "Halbert is keeping her rather dark; but she is bound to win against anything that is entered yet, and will in the end, unless some stranger is run in on us."

"That is just it; there is likely to be one. If so, it is one that I will have an interest in winning the money. Do you understand?"

"I think I do," answered Jack, looking at him and speaking slowly.

"I supposed you would. Well, we can talk further of it on my way back to the station."

"You are not going to leave here to-night," asserted Jack.

"Oh, yes, I will. I may see you again before long, but to-night I must try to catch that one o'clock train at the crossing."

"Is it necessary?" persisted Jack, loth to part with this one spar that had floated back from the wreck of his other life.

Lawrence smiled as he touched with his ringed finger the dead ashes of his cigar.

"Necessary?" he repeated; "well, I am not so sure. But should I remain, you might have another visitor before morning—one you would not welcome."

Jack gave an exclamation of surprise. "After all these years do you mean——"

He stopped, and the other resumed. "After all these years I meant just that. I saw him yesterday on the boat, the first time in five years. The last time was in Europe. He dodged out of sight yesterday; but I've no doubt he will follow me—poor devil!"

"Poor devil!" echoed Jack, impatiently. "Fred, in some things you are a bigger fool than any man living. Why don't you put an end to it, instead of allowing yourself to be haunted so?"

"Oh! what's the use? Only I don't care to be made a target of, so I must try to keep out of his way."

"That's all stuff," answered Jack. "You a target! the best shot on the lower river!"

"So they used to say," asserted Lawrence; "but this is a case in which I could not shoot—oh, yes, I know your opinion"—as Jack's face expressed his contempt; "but that don't alter my ideas. It is not hard to avoid him. He is getting too miserably poor to travel, and, as I have been doing considerable of it in late years, it is easy to keep out of his way. You see, sometime she may be able to understand, and if she did, what would she say if I had harmed him? And then there is the child."

Both men sat silent after this, Lawrence watching a hawk soaring high up against the pink of the sky. Inside they could hear Merze as she walked back and forth over the loosened boards of the floor; the crackle of the flame, and the hissing of the tea-kettle came to them. Did the homely sounds bring a sense of rest to this man

whom Jack had called haunted? He leaned back on the bench, closing his eyes in a tired way. Then, and then only, could Jack see that the years were telling on him—the years that the blue eyes had met so dauntlessly and smiled down; but in repose their cool brightness was hidden, and tiny lines showed that the surveyor, Time, had mapped out the path over which Old Age would one day walk.

CHAPTER VI.

Merze came to the door. "Come, dada," she said. The supper was very slim and not very well prepared, but no apologies were offered. If Merze felt a half shame and reluctance in offering a cup with a broken handle to this visitor, she did not let it be known beyond a slight flush of the face or a nervousness of the hands as she arranged the scant tableware. But the keen eyes opposite her saw and understood, feeling a half pity for her pride, mingled with admiration for the cool self-command with which she ignored her surroundings.

Supper over and the table cleared, they still sat around it talking of past years, of old chums, of war times which they shared together—tales of field and camp life over which they laughed, and to which Merze listened as eagerly as they.

"I wish there would be another war," she declared. "If there were I would go with dada."

"Oh, no, you wouldn't," replied Jack. "If dada ever shoulders a gun again it will be to carry it to a pawnshop; and there are plenty others who fought on both sides who feel the same—good soldiers, too."

"I wouldn't," said Merze; "it must be grand—the

music and the cheering and the thunder of the cannon! I'd go if they would have me."

"And be frightened to death at the first shot," laughed Lawrence.

"Would I?" she flashed back. "I can shoot better than most boys of my age, can't I, dada? Give me your revolver. I'll let you see if I'm afraid of powder!" Jack handed her his revolver. "What shall I use for a target?"

"That barrel in front of the door," suggested Lawrence, for which she gave him a withering look.

"I will use that slim, white sycamore by the spring, and the bullet will strike within an inch of the line where the fence reaches." Lawrence laughed at the tinge of bravado in her tone. "Don't you believe I can?" she demanded.

"Don't ask about my belief," he answered; "but if you can hit that mark in this light you will do for a soldier, and will deserve a prize."

She stood in the doorway. From the dusk of the surrounding trees the white sycamore shone like a slim, white ghost. Crack! went the revolver. "Now go and see," she said to Jack, who went without demur.

"Half an inch from the line," he called back. "Come and see, Fred."

"You have made your boast true," said Lawrence, coming back. "Not an easy thing to do even in sunlight. I have no medal for you as a prize, but here is something you can keep in trust until I can replace it with something to your taste. Shall it be a silver-mounted revolver?" and he held out to her the ring he had worn.

"Oh, I can't take that, it is too handsome!" she said, drawing back.

"Never mind its beauty. I only give it to you in pawn until I have something to leave instead," and he put the ring in her hand, taking the revolver from her as he did so. He was about to lay it on the table, when he looked at it closer. "That looks like a duplicate of mine," he remarked, and taking one from his pocket and laying it beside Jack's. They were indeed *fac-similes* of each other. After comparing them each returned his own to his pocket.

Merze bid them good-night early, as she wanted to get in her room alone, such a new strange current seemed to have drifted into her life that day, and she wanted to be alone to think it all over.

"I will say good-bye instead of good-night," said Lawrence, offering his hand. "I leave to-night."

"But you're coming back sometime?"

"Certainly, to exchange a revolver for the ring. Jack and I are going to talk business now, and the outgrowth of it may be that you will leave these hills. Would that please you? I see it would. Well, good-bye until I see you again."

Then she left them alone in a haze of smoke from pipes and cigars, and, throwing herself on the bed, dressed as she was, gave herself up to thoughts which the day had brought—the one day which in all her life was to stand alone, apart from all others. How vague and wild and sweet were the fancies born of that meeting by the overturned chestnut! How great he was! Ah! if sometime she might see him again, and hear him tell her she had done well in any of the things he had counseled. And, added to these, came the thought of Lawrence's words, significant of some change in their lives. She was conscious of a half-

defined wish that it had been her unknown friend instead of Lawrence who had been the one to deliver them from this poverty-striken life—why, she could not have told. Lawrence had been most kind, but neither his ring nor hints of prosperity for them could eclipse the memory of a strong, dark-eyed face, or drown the echo of a mellow musical voice with its undertone half-mocking, half-sad. Lying on the bed, her hands clasped above her head, her eyes closed, the words and tones came back to her, and with them came bright hopes that left smiles about her lips.

"How good it is that I can remember it all—every word—and the way he looked and spoke! I never remembered anyone's words so before. But then it was only to-day—perhaps I will forget." She was lying in a half-dreamy state when that thought came to her: "Perhaps I will forget." Her heart seemed to stop beating at the shock of the words that filled her with terror. Her eyes were wide open, her hands clenched closely over her breast as if to keep within the memories she feared time might dim. She was only a child, and did not know that to many women there is ever a present in which they are only too happy to find oblivion from the past, no matter how sweet their past was when they had it. She was too much of a child to know that—a child who slipped from the bed to the floor in an attitude of prayer—she who in all her life had been taught nothing of prayers—kneeling there, shivering with terror at the thought of those memories ever slipping out of her reach, muttering over and over: "Don't let me forget. Kill me, but don't let me forget!"

Her words were as the pleadings of a darkened, distraught mind to which a gleam of sanity had been given,

followed by the sickening fear that it may not last. just so intense was the fear that had come to her, child as she was.

How long she crouched there on the floor she could not tell. She heard the men's voices outside as they walked up and down the yard. Finally they stopped somewhere near, but she paid no heed. They were seated on the bench outside the door, and Jack had evidently forgotten that the window of Merze's room was open beside them. And through her simple, aimless prayer—for to no deity was it offered; it was rather to a something within herself that she pleaded—a something whose depth and strength had never been tested, but on which she now relied and to which she repeated: "Don't let me forget—" Through this self-communion there came to her ears a name, one that brought her back from the visionary hopes and fears to the real life about her. The name was that of the boy who had loaned her books, Glenn Halbert. It was Jack's voice speaking: "Yes, Starlight belongs to the boy. The rest of the stock is the old man's. The races are several weeks off, so I will have plenty of time; no danger of hurry or bungling."

"Well, it means just that much money to you, and a prospect of something better. I shall fit up a place in the West this winter, and will need someone to help with it. If this affair goes all right the berth is yours."

"And you may bet all you've got it will go right," declared Jack. "You may put your money on the other side as high as you want to, for Halbert's nag won't have wind enough left to carry her around the track by the time I dose her."

"Don't go to extremes, Jack; be cautious," advised Lawrence.

And then their conversation went on, but it was on the probable chances of horses whose names Merze did not know, and she heeded nothing of their words. "What shall I do? What can I do?" she thought, blankly. Starlight, pretty, spirited Starlight, that Glenn loved as if she were a human being! Glenn, who despite his teasing had been good and kind to her! She must tell him; but how and when?

Long she sat there thinking what she should do, until her head was aching and dizzy. Then mechanically she rose and crept out into the other room. The candle had burned out. Only the moon threw a pale light over the floor. The men were still in front of the house. Like a ghost she slipped out through the back door, which stood open, out through the yard until she reached the strip of meadow where there was neither bush nor fence to hide her in case they should glance that way. Down she dropped, and crept through the grass like a slim, agile snake, scarcely daring to breathe in the intensity of her fear that they may stop her. Her one thought was that Halbert must know to-night; for, perhaps, before she could get there in the morning something might be done to injure Starlight; what, she had no idea; only she knew Jack meant harm to the horse.

Once out of the meadow she rose to her feet and ran —on along the by-path skirting the timber—heedless of branches that caught at her, of briars that tore her clothes and her hands—on through the clearing where the blackened stumps loomed up tomb-like and spectral. A distant dog's bark came to her ears; an owl hooted by her almost in her face; startled night birds fluttered from her path; lurid fox-fire gleamed from a dark mass up in the woods above her; but by all she passed without

seeing or hearing. To get there and back home again before Jack would fasten up the house or know she was gone, was her only thought. At last she reached the white gate of the Homestead. A dog came bounding toward her across the low fence—a big, grizzled mastiff, with fiery eyes, making long leaps. Swiftly as he ran, he made no sound. Closer, closer he came, with the danger betokened by silence in every sinewy stretch of the supple body. The girl stopped, her face pallid with horror. She knew the brute, and knew the danger. Two days before he had thrown and killed a young heifer, and her limbs seemed paralyzed. She tried to turn and run, but could not. She tried to scream, but all her voice seemed locked in her throat. Another leap and he would be on her! She held out her hand as the panting breath came near enough to be felt. "Bruno," she whispered, for only under her breath could she find strength to speak. He knew her voice, but too late to check his headlong leap. His immense paws fell with crushing force on her breast and struck her to the ground. A faint scream fell on the still air of the night, and then she lay like a dead thing, moveless, breathless, with the dog crouching beside her with a cringing, subdued whine that seemed to plead for pardon or some sign of life. But none came, and, raising his face skyward, he gave a couple of sharp barks, followed by a long, low howl, such as the superstitious turn in their beds at the sound of, and murmur: "The dog calls for a death. God keep it from our dearest!"

From a solitary window of the Homestead a light shone. All the rest was dark. As that faint scream rent the air, the curtain of the lighted room was drawn aside, and a figure stood in the window a moment as if listening, and was about to turn away when the dog's howl sounded

dismally through the stillness. In a moment the figure was out through the window onto the dewy sward of the lawn.

"Bruno! What is it, Bruno?"

No Bruno came in answer, but again came tnat mournful call to his ears. The figure of a man followed the sound until a turn in the path brought him within two feet of the girl lying on the grass. The dog was licking her hands, moaning and whining the while.

"Merze! What does this mean? Merze! Merze!" But the white face lay unmoved, the icy hands nerveless. "Watch her Bruno, good Bruno!" and the man turned again toward the house. Swiftly he covered the distance and came back with a flask in his hand. Forcing a little of the contents between the white lips, he watched the faint struggle for breath, and then the big eyes opened wide, and met the others bending above her. Twice she tried to speak, but the white lips refused their office, and she could only look.

"Lie still; don't try to talk," said the man, who was holding both her hands in his as if to give them warmth. "Here, try and swallow some more of the brandy."

She shook her head while her hands closed around his.

"King Arthur! King Arthur! I am so glad—I will never forget—" She had forgotten all: her errand, her fright, and the cause of that deathly, sinking sensation which had seemed to her as if all life was slipping from her grasp.

At the sound of her voice Bruno, who had stood at her head, came timidly around beside her and laid his nose against her shoulder. As she saw him, memory came back, and the man, seeing the terror in her eyes, drew

her closer, as he would a little child, while, with the other hand, he pushed the dog away.

"Never mind, it is all right. Bruno won't harm you; don't be so frightened, child." Thus he talked softly, soothingly, his voice sounding to the girl as a caressing lullaby after the horror she had endured. But through it all there came to her sharply the sense of where she was and the reason of her coming.

"Help me up," she said. "I must go."

"You must do nothing of the sort; you must remain here, until morning at any rate," asserted the man, as he noted the trembling of her form and the pallor of her face.

"I *must*, I tell you!" she answered determinedly, persisting in rising to her feet, where she swayed and would have fallen but for him. "Oh, what is it that ails me?" she half whispered. "Everything seems slipping away —brandy, give it me quick!" He held it to her lips and she swallowed a little, still clinging to him as if determined to stand.

"Let me carry you to the house and call one of the women-servants."

"No," she answered, straightening herself with an effort. "I don't dare; I must go at once. I can stand now; the brandy helped me. Don't let them know I am here; no one must know; only you must tell them about Starlight early in the morning."

"Yes, yes," he assented, soothingly, thinking her mind was a little dazed. "But come to the house. If you must go home, I must get you a wrap and go with you."

"Oh!" she burst out, irritably, "I tell you no! I will go alone, and you must tell them to send Starlight away, or do something with her. Don't look at me as if my

head was wrong. That is what I came for, because it is Glenn's animal. I ran all the way, and then Bruno frightened me so; but it is all going away. I'm all right now."

The man looked at her through this broken, disjointed speech, not understanding, but feeling that she was in earnest.

"Look here," he said at last, "what is it you mean? Why must they send Starlight away?"

"Didn't I tell you?" she asked, impatiently. "Because if she stays they will do something to her to keep her from winning the race."

"How do you know? Tell me all about it; who will harm her?"

"I can't. I must go. Tell them if they do keep her here, to let no one but Hen touch her feed. No one could bribe him, and he must not leave her night or day. Oh! *make* them listen, and mind what I tell you; only don't let them know who informed you."

"Would it bring harm to you?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know what it might bring. They can't kill me, I suppose. But I must go. I am so glad it was you who came to me; I was afraid I would never see you again."

"Are you strong enough to go alone? Let me go with you," he offered again, but she shook her head.

"No, no, you must not. I am all right now."

"Put this in your pocket," and he handed her the flask of brandy. "You may feel faint again." She demurred until he said decidedly: "If you won't take this, you must take me, for I can't have you go alone with nothing to strengthen you. Take it to please me, and if you find yourself getting faint don't hesitate to swallow it. Now,

good-night, since you insist on going alone. You are a brave girl to come as you have to warn them about the mare. I will have it attended to without suspicion regarding you or your father."

She looked at him, feeling that he understood, but would not betray her. "Thank you," she said, "thank you," and with a swift, sure step, in which force of will eclipsed physical strength, she turned and walked away in the moonlight, while for the second time that day the man watched her disappearing form with curious emotions.

"A brave child, Bruno," he said, as she faded from view in the silvery belt of young willows that skirted the faintly-lighted fields. "A curious compound of weakness and strength, but a brave child!"

CHAPTER VII.

Back over the wood path walked Merze, keeping her steps sure and her form erect despite the buzzing, confused feeling in her head. She saw the landmarks she passed not a half hour before, but to her dazed senses years seemed to have elapsed since she ran, heedless of the night's awe, careless of the branches and briers clutching at her as she sped. Then a dozen fears and fancies born of her errand chased one another through her brain; now she walked on, steadily, swiftly on, with only one dull, never-changing thought in her throbbing brain—the thought that, though she dropped dead on the threshold, yet she must force strength to get once more in her own room; that Jack must find her there in the morning.

Her eyes were half-blinded and dizzy, but she fought it off and kept steadily on. She thought it must be a thing like death that was coming to her, dulling her senses and putting that murmur in her ears, like the sound of many voices afar off, and then growing nearer and nearer, until they crowded so close about that they seemed to leave her no room, except close against a large tree. She clung to it, steadying herself as well as she could, though earth and heaven seemed swaying; and, as she became more conscious and tried to go on, there came to her again that murmur of voices—not imaginary this time, for, faint as she was, she knew it was human tones.

Shrinking back into the shadow, she waited until they should pass. Up in the woods above gleamed the fox-fire; all else was in dense shadow under the trees. Suddenly, between herself and it passed a something that obscured it ; not an owl, it was too large ; not an animal, it was too silent. Awe-stricken, she watched it, and as her eyes became accustomed to the gloom, she saw it was a man, a man who was standing not twenty feet from her—standing as if listening to the voices that came nearer and nearer, and from the direction of her home.

She never could tell how long she stood so, watching the man who, unconscious of her presence, was waiting for the owners of the voices. She saw them coming along the path where it crossed an open space, and where the moon's light fell full on Lawrence and Jack.

She had only time to see who it was and to shrink closer into the shadow when that other silent watcher walked deliberately into the path ahead of them. At the same instant a shot cut the air, quick, sharp ; and following it came three others, almost simultaneously.

She heard broken exclamations, and a second later only two men stood in the open space, and one of those was staggering and grasping at the other's arm.

"Jack, old fellow—my God, Jack! are you hit?"

"Yes." That was all the answer, in a voice that sounded husky and uncertain.

Merze did not scream, though the words came to her distinctly; but in a moment she crashed through the low brush and was beside him. She half stumbled over something lying in the path, and her foot came down on a thing which turned as a snake does when trod on. She passed unheeding, not knowing it was the wrist of a dead man.

"Dada! dada!" she cried, as he sank between herself and Lawrence to the ground.

"Merze, is it you? I am glad. I——"

"Don't try to talk," admonished Lawrence. "Where are you hit? I hope to God it is not serious!" He looked at Merze in amazement; but this was no time for questionings, and his face was very anxious as he bent over Jack.

"It's too late for that hope," answered Jack. "He has settled me. Poor Merze, poor girl!"

"Don't give up, Jack; it may not be fatal. We will send for the nearest doctor. Where are you hit?"

Jack looked at him, shaking his head.

"It is here," he answered, pointing to where the blood was oozing out a little below the throat. "A doctor can do no good. I know what a shot like this means. It may leave me an hour, not more. Don't move me. Let me be here with Merze—poor Merze!"

The girl had said nothing. She sat holding his head in her lap, her hand crimson with the blood she was trying

to staunch, but all to no purpose. With every labored breath it spurted out afresh. She was not crying, but at Jack's last words she lifted her face toward Lawrence with such a depth of tearless grief in her eyes that the man turned his head and rose, clenching his hands in the bitterness of his great grief and rage.

"Oh, God!" he half whispered, through set teeth, "what can I do? Must I let you die like this, and for *me?* That shot was meant for me. Oh, Jack, Jack!" He was walking to and fro, with broken words, half curses, half prayers, on his lips. There was no mistaking the man's sincerity. The thought of Jack dying in his stead—through him—metamorphosed the cool, self-contained stranger into a wild man.

Merze held out her hand to him, scarce seeing the blood drops falling from it.

"Don't!" she cried. "Be quiet; it hurts him." For Jack's eyes showed his wishes, though he could not speak. But when Lawrence came and knelt quietly beside him he smiled, and, after an effort, whispered: "I must talk; some whiskey!"

"And I have not a drop!" groaned Lawrence.

"Here," said Merze. "In my pocket; get it, quick!"

In a moment Lawrence had it, and was holding it to Jack's lips. It revived him, and he laid one hand on Lawrence's.

"I want to talk while I can. I am glad you are here—only you and Merze—with me at the last. You gave up your chance of life once to me, and now——"

"Don't, Jack!" broke in the other, huskily. "You are dying for me—don't I know it? You took the bullet meant to reach me—God in heaven, why did it not?"

Again Merze threw out her hand in restraint, and

again he silently obeyed her. She, child as she was, with all her weight of dull, dumb agony, seemed the stronger of the two.

"Because your time hadn't come, Fred, and mine has. Don't fret, old fellow; it was down on the cards, and had to be played; nothing could alter that. But my last game has cleared the table of that thing which has hoodooed you so long." And Jack made a movement toward the dark mass at the edge of the moonlit space. "Is it all over with him?"

Lawrence walked over, and bent for a moment toward the form over which the chill of death had already fallen.

"Yes," he answered, in a subdued voice, but loud enough for them to hear distinctly.

"How many shots struck him?" asked Jack.

Lawrence knelt for a moment, running his hands over the body before him. Then he rose and came back.

"One," he said, looking at Jack questioningly. Something like a smile passed over Jack's face at the word.

"It is luck," he said, gaspingly; "a little luck at last." He motioned for the flask, which Lawrence held to his lips, and, after a little while, continued: "I want you to listen, both of you. They say the eyes of the dying see clear. I think so now. I see something that means danger to you—that means death."

"Never mind me," said Lawrence; "think of yourself and of Merze, poor child! If I could only help you in this."

"Poor child!" echoed Jack. "But you will try to keep her from fretting, I know that. It is the other I must speak of while I can. If you are found here

by anyone who knows him it is *you* they will accuse of his murder."

"Let them !" answered Lawrence, fiercely. "Perhaps they would be right. It may have been my bullet."

"And it may have been mine," added Jack. "We will never know. Did you think of that ?"

Lawrence looked at him questioningly, and then his face cleared.

"True. I did not think of it. They were both alike. Strange it should have happened so."

"Not so strange. It is luck, I tell you. Luck sent to clear you and give me a chance to pay the debt I've owed you for years."

"What are you talking of, Jack ? Think of Merze, not me."

"I am thinking of you both. She is a good girl, and will back me up in what I want done, for she'll know it's my last deal, and will not object. Some more of that brandy."

He was growing weaker, despite the sustaining power of the brandy ; his breath came spasmodically, and the voice was growing more broken and uncertain. Merze, holding his head, could feel the convulsive bracing of the muscles as he made an effort to continue.

"Don't say anything. Let me finish first. Merze, this was my only friend ; remember that, and do as I ask. To-morrow, when they ask you, do not tell them Fred was here. I killed him. Tell them I said so. Promise me."

"I won't have it !" exclaimed Lawrence. "I'll take my chance. It is enough to lose your life like this, through me, without leaving that legacy to Merze."

"She will leave here. You take care of her. Change

her name. No one need know who her father was. There are no relations but her mother's people. Never go to them. Promise me, Merze. I hated them always! Don't go to them."

"I never will, dada," answered the girl, soothingly, for the memory of them had infused a spirit of impotent hate into the red tide of his veins, and was causing it to ebb the faster.

"That is a good girl! a good girl! And you will tell them I killed him. There was no one else. Remember that—you will tell them?"

The girl did not answer. She was trying to think what she should say, but could not concentrate her thoughts; and her mind was wandering, wandering off to another time when Jack's head had lain in her lap just so. It was on a flat-boat opposite Natchez. Her mother was sitting near, sewing, and looking ill-tempered. Some negroes were singing a little below, on the bank, and Jack lay with his head in her lap, drunk. She had a willow branch, and was keeping the flies off his face. There was one big one that would not go, but came back again and again. And the wash of the waves, and the soft, soothing refrain of the song, and the heat of the sun, made her so drowsy—so—

"Merze, don't say you won't! Promise me quick! It's the last thing I have to ask of you. I've been bad, bad; but it's your duty to help me square what I can."

Jack's voice brought her to with a start. One word struck a chord that otherwise he might not have reached. Was it chance that placed it on Jack's lips? The word he had disregarded all his life—*duty*. Like a flash came to her the counsel in the woods—the words of the man who seemed to her fit to be lawgiver to

the world : "Do the work duty brings to you, if you would make good use of your life."

"Promise me, Merze, promise me !"

"I promise, dada," she answered.

He gave a sigh of content, and sank a little heavier against her arm.

"Then it's all right. She will keep her word, Fred; so go. Catch that train. You can do it yet."

"Go, Jack, and leave you like this ? I can't do that ; don't ask it. The girl will be alone without you ; think of that."

"She is not afraid. Come or send for her after a few days, when it is all over. Try and give her school—I can't—I—"

"While I have a dollar she shall be cared for, be sure of that."

"I am—I wish I could see——" His voice died away, and the brandy was once more held to his lips. He swallowed it, and looked up into the other man's face long and steadily ; then he asked :

"There is no one in your life—no woman ?"

"You know," answered the other. "Why do you ask ?"

"I am afraid they will take her—her mother's people. She will be a woman soon. There is one way——"

"Would it please you ?" is all Lawrence said.

"Yes. I am afraid—the law will give her to them. I hate them. Don't let it—don't let it."

"I won't if Merze is willing," answered Lawrence. Then he turned to her. She had heard their words, scarcely heeding or understanding. Her eyes were watching the fitful rise and fall of Jack's throat. Lawrence laid his hand on her shoulder as he said :

"Merze, it seems terrible to speak of this now, but it is to content him. Would you be willing to marry me?"

"Marry you?" repeated the girl, in a dazed way, knitting her brows in pained perplexity.

"Yes; listen. Jack has given you to me. I am to take care of you and send you to school; but he would die more contented if you would also promise to be my wife."

"Oh, dada, dada: What does it mean?"

"It is for your good, Merze; so you can be taken care of when dada is gone. It will change your name; the others won't find you then. It would please me. Will you, Merze?"

"I don't care," she answered, listlessly, numb with it all. I will do as you ask."

"Merze, my little Merze!" he half whispered; and then to Lawrence: "Go now, at once. As I said, don't let them find you here."

"Jack, I can't!" muttered the other, rising, and looking across toward the dark mass with the steel of a revolver gleaming near it. "Leave Merze alone in such a place? I can't do it!"

Merze, watching Jack's face, saw the intensity of his anxiety.

"Do as he asks, Mr. Lawrence," she urged. "I am not afraid; he is right. I have promised to tell what he wants; but it is all of no use, he says, if you and your revolver are found here. Go at once; it will satisfy him. Please do. It is hurting him to hear you refuse."

He looked at her a moment, and then knelt beside them.

"Jack, old friend, I will go, and will do as you say.

She shall be taken care of until she is a woman, and then——"

"Now—now," faltered the other. "Your hands so I can see them—promise each other."

Lawrence looked at Merze, and reached his hand across the dying man's form. Merze laid hers in it.

"I promise to legally marry her as soon as she is willing."

"Promise, Merze, promise," whispered Jack.

"I promise to marry him."

Jack gave a sigh of relief, and whispered: "It is the same as a marriage; remember that, Merze, the same as a marriage. Go now—go, Fred, and good luck—go—with—you."

For a moment the men clasped hands, and looked into each other's eyes for the last time. Then Lawrence rose, and Merze heard his steps grow fainter and fainter; but she did not look after him. Her eyes were on Jack's face.

He lay quietly; his breathing was more even. Was it her fancy that every breath was a little fainter than the last? Once or twice she heard him whisper: "Merze, my Merze!"

Ten minutes may have elapsed when they were found so, she sitting in the same position, her face like white marble, he with the signs of life so faint that only her eyes could detect it still there.

A man, coming along the wood path with a Turkish pipe in his mouth, stopped short at the sight of the three figures in the open moonlit space. Then he sprang forward to her side.

"God in heaven! What is it, child?"

She looked up and tried to speak, but no words came.

"I heard the shots, and grew uneasy. Finally I started to walk this way—and all the time you have been with this—alone!"

He tried to help her to rise by lifting the burden from her lap—the body he thought lifeless from the icy touch. Did that last word reach the sense of the dying? The eyes closed and opened again, the throat rose and fell with the intense struggle for the words which came:

"Alone—I—I killed him—alone!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"Is she no better?"

It was one week later, and the speaker was the careless-looking man whom Merze had called "King Arthur." He was sitting on the wooden bench outside the door of the log house where Jack and Lawrence had sat and talked that last night together.

"Well, I don't know as she is, and I don't know but what she is; she's quiet now, anyway, an' that's one blessin', fer her talk jest about druv me distracted. But now that her kinsfolks has sent someone to look after her I won't have so much of it on my shoulders. She's to take her somewhere to her folks, as soon as she's able to be moved; that's what she's come fer, I reckon."

"Can I see the nurse?"

"I expect not, but I'll ask her," and the lanky specimen of feminine Kentucky sidled into the house. She had been bothered by so many questioners during the past week that they had begun to meet with scant courtesy when they thronged down the country roads, curious to hear all concerning the double tragedy, and peer

into the square, oddly-furnished room where the bodies had lain during the inquest—in which there was but one witness, and that was the man waiting outside.

He had heard three or four shots—four he thought, and had walked in their direction. Had found the stranger dead, and had been in time to hear Mignot's last words, in which he said he had killed the man. Two chambers had been emptied from each man's revolver, and the jury agreed that each had come to his death at the hands of the other ; why or wherefore none could tell, as none had ever seen the stranger in those parts, though people had come from far and near to look and speculate over the affair.

On that point alone had Merze been questioned that morning : "Did she know—had she ever seen—the dead man ? or did she know the cause of the tragedy ?"

To all she could truthfully say "No." And by noon she was past answering any questions, and the verdict was rendered, and the bodies buried just outside the pailings of the country graveyard, side by side.

The girl lay babbling of blood that was turning all the grass red, and begging them to take the snowdrops away —away where it would not drip over them ; and then she would forget them in her pleading for "Dada, dada, dada !" until tears would creep up to the eyes of the sun-bronzed woman beside her.

That day for the first time she was quieter, and as the woman drew aside the curtain from the door-way, she seemed sleeping. By the little square window at the end of the room sat another woman—not one of the natives—one could see that at a glance ; but a quiet, self-contained looking person in a neat black dress, who was turning over the leaves of an old magazine in an idle way.

"What is it, Mrs. Williams?" she asked, looking up.

"It's a man that wants to know if he can talk to you."

"Who is he?"

"I know him by sight, but ain't good at 'membrin' names. He's a visitor 'cross at Halbert Homestead. He's the man that found the bodies."

"I don't see why I should be annoyed by those people. I don't know anything about the affair, and don't want to, and you can tell him so," and she turned again to the book; but Mrs. Williams hesitated.

"I couldn't tell him that very well; he ain't like none of the people hereabouts, an' I don't think he wants to say anything about the shootin'. I reckon it's about her," with a jerk of her thumb toward the girl on the bed.

"Oh, well! I will see him, then, if you remain here," and, rising, she passed into the other room, and then to the door.

"You wished to speak with me?" she said to the dark man who raised his hat with a grace not met often "hereabouts," as Mrs. Williams expressed it.

"Are you the lady who has come to nurse Merze?"

"Well, I have not come to nurse her, but since she requires it I do it. As soon as she can be moved I am to take her away; that is what I came for."

"Pardon me, but are you a relative?" he asked, wondering who this compact, business-like little woman was, and if she would have any part in the future life of the girl in the darkened room.

"No, I am not a relative—merely a companion sent to take the girl to her friends."

"Then she has friends to care for her?"

"Yes."

"Would you mind telling me who they are?" The woman's manner, though courteous enough, did not invite questioning, and he was not much surprised when she answered : "I can't do that. They evidently want to separate her entirely from her present surroundings. I would like to oblige you, but can't. I am simply paid to take charge of the girl, fit her out with wardrobe, etc., and take her to the person in whose employ I am. I believe she is to be put to school at once, judging from the style of dresses and things I am to buy her. The things in the house are to be disposed of as she wishes ; but of her destination after leaving here I am to answer no questions."

"All I cared to know was if she would have an assured home. No doubt her relatives would want her to forget all her life here, poor child ! It will be well if she can. I have been much interested in her, but if she has friends to claim her, I can be of no use, I suppose. I leave this part of the country to-day, and would like to leave my address for her in case—well, in case she should ever need a friend. When she is better, will you give it to her?"

"You can leave it." She did not say she would deliver it, but he did not note the evasion in her reply. He scribbled a few lines on a card and handed it to her, and she put it in her pocket, and turned to go in.

"Am I not to see her?" he asked, noticing that her manner did not seem to favor a visit.

She hesitated, looking uncertain.

"Oh, well!" she said, at last, "I suppose you can. They didn't say anything about letting people see her, so I will not be disobeying orders anyway. Come in."

He followed her in through the big square room and under the curtain of the door.

"I think she is sleeping," she said, in a low tone, as he stood silently by the bed. She lay with closed eyes, her cheeks flushed, her hair scattered in bronze waves over the pillow. One hand was over her head, the other lay brown against the green-and-white patchwork of the quilt, and on one finger he saw gleaming a ring—an opal surrounded by diamonds—a strange thing for her to wear. It had been there that night when he carried her home in a dead faint and laid her on the home-made lounge while he went to tell the neighbors of two bodies found on the wood path, but he had not noticed it. He had told none that Merze was found by her father's side that night; why, he could not have explained to himself, unless it was to save her the pain of answering unnecessary questions. She had answered the leading ones, and he thought that was all that should be required of her; but now, looking at the costly, old-fashioned ring, he was not so sure. But she was past answering now for many a day.

"What does the doctor say? Is she out of danger?" he asked. The flushed face made him anxious, knowing, as he did, the intense strain put on the girlish form that one night.

"Yes," answered the woman, "she will be all right now with good nursing."

The man looked long at the closed lids, which were, nevertheless, very tremulous—disturbed, perhaps, by the voices, or was it at the sound of the one voice she had begged so never to forget? As he turned to leave, they raised; the big eyes opened wide, gazing up into his.

"The snowdrops," she muttered, "the snowdrops;

bring them to me. Not the ones with red drops on them—the white stars that grow so deep in the shade; but we can find them some day—if—only I don't forget!"

Then the voice died away in inarticulate, broken murmurs, while a moisture crept into the man's eyes as he heard.

"God grant that you don't forget, child," he said, and, pulling his slouched hat low over his eyes, he turned with no words to either of the women standing by, and walked through the other room out into the sunshine.

CHAPTER IX.

Doubt, a blank twilight of the heart, which mars
All sweetest colors in its dimness same;
A soul mist, through whose rifts familiar stars
Beholding, we misname. —*Ingelow.*

A murmur and clatter of girlish voices filled the air and floated up through a window where two forms were outlined against the white background of a calcimined wall —those walls that hold so little of cheer in their unvarying sameness—as little of homeliness as one finds in the walls of a hospital.

"Is that all he says, Miss Lawrence?"

"That is all in which you can have any interest, Miss Powell."

The woman's face flushed darkly at the girl's tone. She stood irresolutely for a moment, looking as if it would have given her pleasure to strike the smiling, insolent face. Then she turned, and said:

"I shall repeat your rudeness to Mrs. Smith, and

allow her to speak to you, since my kindly overtures have met with such ingratitude."

"Yes, do," said the girl, persuasively; and she coolly resumed interest in the croquet game before her. When she turned again, Miss Powell was gone.

"The cat!" she muttered; "why can't she leave me alone? She was dying to know why I was leaving, and all about it. I wonder what she would say if she did know all about it?" And the girl's face lightened with a half-dreaming, half-sarcastic smile, as she saw in her mind's eye the sensation which the newly-received letter would occasion if its contents were known to her school-mates and teachers.

The letter was still clasped close in her hand, as when she had deliberately folded and held it in front of Miss Powell's eyes, that were questioning as to its contents. She opened it again, and glanced down until she came to the lines: "I am sorry not to be able to go for you, and hope you will not mind the short journey alone. I will meet the boat at Wheeling, where I will make arrangements for our marriage; and, as I have business in Baltimore, and must go through at once, I will take you with me. Now, if there is anything in this to which you object or would wish changed, write me at once; if not, I shall expect to take formal possession of you one week from the day this reaches you; and, until then, am yours as ever, FRED LAWRENCE."

"A week from to-day!"

She dropped her hands in her lap, and, leaning her head against the window-casing, gazed out over the girls beneath—over the rolling hills to the south, where a haze of smoke betrayed the site of Cincinnati—the haven for the girls when a holiday was in question—for all but her.

She alone had been there, winter and summer, for four years, with never a vacation ; and not very happy years were they. Mrs. Smith's Home for Young Ladies was conducted on strictly business principles, from which neither the principal nor her niece ever diverged enough to allow sympathy or understanding for the heart-needs of their pupils.

To Lawrence this view had never presented itself. It was a school where they boarded girls—that was all he knew. He had been asked, among other questions, by the principal : "What religion ?" It had disconcerted him for a moment, knowing so little of Jack's family, and at last he answered :

"None !"

"None ?" echoed the prim-looking lady, with a note of pained surprise in her voice—the lady whose opinion of another person's work on the "Mosaic Origin of the Pentateuchal Codes" had been so much praised—"none ?"

"None," he answered. "Teach her all you can—all she wants to know, but let her choose for herself as to religions."

And so Merze had entered the school under a ban. Few know or thoroughly understand the faith of their own fathers, and beyond a monotonous prayer every morning, they were not enlightened on those questions in the school. But all of them were taught at home to believe in something, and looked askance at the big-eyed girl with close-cropped hair and thin face. For in some unknown way it had been whispered about that the new-comer was an unbeliever, an atheist—a thing terrible. Some of the smaller girls were afraid of her, and went to bed in fear and trembling, until, as time went on, and

the house had not been struck by lightning, and no earthquake had visited the region, they began to grow braver, but never enough so to pass the room alone in the dark. And Merze, not knowing the cause, knew only the outgrowth of it, and grew cold and distant to all, while they looked on her as an alien—this girl who mentioned no kindred, no home, no friends, no God. If there is any congregation more clannish than a consolidation of school girls, I have yet failed to find it; and to Merze, heartsick and sombre, needing, as but few need, the companionship of loving hearts, they were implacable.

But that did not prevent her studying. Books—the things she had longed for always—were within her reach, and in them she forgot the chilliness about her, unless, at times, it was thrust on her notice, and then her curt tongue left them with a sort of respect for the girl who could hold her own so well in their encounters, and who was working steadily ahead of most of them in the studies they shared together. But in none did she find the friend or chum so dear to girlhood. The nearest approach to it was when one of the girls, a slight, timid creature, fell in the grounds and sprained her ankle, and Merze, finding her, raised the light form, and carried her bodily into the house, and helped dress and care for her until she was quite well.

The girl, Alice, at first shrank a little from the self-appointed nurse; but she found, when the pain was most severe, no words were so gentle, no hand so caressing, as the girl's she had been taught by example to shun.

"Shall I read you something?" Merze asked one day, when she was still unable to walk. Alice gladly consented; but when Merze, picking up a book from the

table, began reading in musical, subdued tones that old story of fair, proud Queen Vashti, the girl turned to her in amazement.

"Why, that is the Bible!" she cried, involuntarily.

"Do you not like it?" asked Merze. "I did not know ; it was on the table, so I took it."

"But—but I thought you did not read it," stammered Alice.

"Oh, yes," answered Merze, calmly; "there's one on the shelf in my room. I read everything I get my hands on, so I read it. There are many beautiful things in it for all the coarseness under which so much of it is hidden."

"Oh, hush, hush!" pleaded Alice in terror. "Oh, Miss Lawrence, don't say such wicked things!"

"Wicked?" said Merze, looking at her astonishedly, "how wicked?"

"Why, to speak like that, as if it were any ordinary book. Mrs. Smith would be very angry if she knew; she is so religious, you know."

"Yes, I know," answered Merze, smilingly. "In the whole course of my life I have met no one so thoroughly religious as our Mrs. Smith, and I am sure I have never met anyone who possessed so much pure, unadulterated meanness in little things, many of which we could not speak of as being strictly honest, even."

"Oh, Miss Lawrence ; if she should hear you!" breathed Alice, in affright. "None of the girls ever dare say such wicked things."

"Why not? I am sure neither herself nor her amiable niece ever spare their opinion, no matter who it falls on. As to the other—the book, I don't see why people should be called wicked for saying what I did."

"I don't know. Of course we all have them and believe in them; but I don't think any of the girls ever read them except in class, and I am sure none of them could ever pick one up to read aloud from to another as you have done."

"Yet you believe in it—have a sort of faith in it?"

"Oh, yes; I would be afraid not to have; it would seem so dreadful! It is inspired, you know—divine."

Merze laughed. "Have you ever heard of the Voodoos of the South?" she asked.

The girl nodded.

"Well, they would stake their souls on the healing and miraculous power possessed by a little shapeless mass given them by one of their rulers or doctors. It would be sacrilege for them to doubt; the thing to them is divine, the one who prepared it inspired. But let it be taken apart, and all you find is the bones of a frog, the feathers of a fowl, the long hair of some woman's head. Perhaps if you were to open the book which now serves you only as the amulet does the Voodoo, and read it thoroughly, you might not have such a terror of thinking for yourself."

This conversation had occurred a year after her entrance to the school, and, coming through Alice to the ears of the other inmates, had not the effect of rendering them more social. And she had a contempt for them in her mind—a contempt for the prim, sweet-faced lady who expended her kind glances and gentle words on the wealthier pupils, at the same time that she weighed out niggardly portions of tea and sugar for the girls' table. And through her contempt for the pettiness around her there grew a yet deeper one for that which they called their religion—of which she had seen little

but meaningless forms, cold, unattractive, without soul. In her ignorance she knew nothing of any other, and she had no one to teach her; small wonder, then, that she grew indifferent as to whether they were right or wrong. But their book of faith, their Bible, she continued to read more as a history than aught else, and because of the poems whose depth and strength appealed to her love of the beautiful. But it was only the beauty she searched for. The divinity in it was unintelligible to her. She passed it by as a child goes through the standing wheat, grasping at the nodding daisies, the golden buttercups, but unconscious that the mainstay of human life stands close around ready for the harvest.

That which came nearest being a substitute for religion was the laws of duty to herself, to others, that were given her by her friend of the brushes and pipe. In her life he was the one divinity—the man who had come to her that one day at her greatest need—who had understood and helped her, and had then dropped out of her knowledge as quickly as he had come, but leaving the impression of his mind and thought on her own. It may have been that very manner of coming and going which made a lasting impression on her girlish love for the stranger. Sometimes she felt as if it were all a fantasy of her illness—the coming of the man who was so unlike other men. But even when her better reason told her it was not, she never could think of him without a veneration tinged with awe that, unconsciously to herself, approached superstition. She never expected to see him, but in all her studies which she conquered she did so with the thought: "He meant me to study so thoroughly."

Toward Lawrence she had gratitude for his kindness

—too much to annoy him by the knowledge of how distasteful her surroundings were ; for she knew nothing of his financial standing, and feared it might embarrass him to send her to another school. Letters came from him regularly—not a lover's letters, but very kind ones, often accompanied by presents calculated to please a girl. Her schoolmates would look curiously at these, for they remembered the fair, jaunty, handsome man who came at long intervals, who seemed the only friend she had, and whose visits were of the briefest.

"Your guardian is a relative, I presume, since the names are alike?" queried Mrs. Smith.

And Merze had answered : "Yes, a relative." For ever in her mind were Jack's words : "It is the same as a marriage, Merze—remember that—the same as a marriage," and she supposed that would be called a relationship, and answered accordingly.

And now, in a few days more, they were to ratify that contract made over the dying. Was she glad or sorry? Sitting there in the window, his letter clasped in the hand which wore his ring, she could hardly tell.

Glad she was to get out of the walls of the place —out into the world ; but once there, her visions of the future were rather vague. She felt that the dreamy ambitions of her early girlhood, her longing childhood, were not to be realized. She had accustomed herself to that thought through the many weeks since the date of the marriage had been settled. She would have been happier could she have said : "Give me back my promise ; let me have the world unfettered ;" but she feared it would be ingratitude to Lawrence, who had been so good to her. And Jack had said their words were a marriage, so she had come to look upon it as

something that was to be, a thing too far accomplished for any word of hers to undo it now.

And so she was to be Lawrence's wife ! She knew less than most girls what that title meant. She had never chatted, as most girls do, over their probable lovers, husbands or homes. She was nineteen, and there had been no lover in her life, no surreptitious billets had been pored over in the secresy of her room. But among the books in the school library she had found poetical works in which the vivid coloring of the pen-pictures appealed to her senses—the tender tales this thing which the poets called "love," and which she tried to understand—this thing over which she pondered with dreamy eyes and a vague dissatisfaction toward herself. She felt it was something beautiful, just as she did the poems in the Bible ; but beyond that she could not go ; the divinity in it escaped her. Yet she was to be a wife in a week.

CHAPTER X.

The subdued glow of amber globes sent a soft flood of light over a richly-furnished room and its two occupants, the one gazing steadily into the mass of blazing coals in the tiled fireplace, the other watching her over the top of the newspaper he was supposed to be reading. It was a fair enough picture for any man's eyes to rest on with delight—with rapture even, if he were so lucky as to be its possessor. A well-shaped head coiled round with tempestuous bronze hair, on which the flickering fire-light brought out gold tinges that came and went, forming an ever-changing frame for a gray-eyed face that looked as if cut from creamy marble—only to marble

could not be given the red lips, full and smooth as a child's. They were curved in a half-bitter smile as she sat there unconscious of his eyes on her—his eyes that had a curious, searching expression in them.

Finally he laid down his paper. The movement arrested her attention, and she withdrew her eyes from the fire with a start, but did not turn them toward him; instead, she sank down a little lower in the sleepy-hollow chair. He smiled at the abject indolence of the attitude.

"Do you know, Mrs. Lawrence, you are the personification of laziness; but for all that you are looking very handsome to-night?"

"I ought to," came from the depths of the chair; "you paid enough for this dress I have on."

"Yes, it is pretty," he said, looking admiringly at the velvet folds, black in the shadows, royal purple in the firelight; "and there are not many women who could wear that shade as you do. It is quite regal, and suits your face. Oh, yes!" he continued, as she sat upright as if on the alert for sarcasm in his voice. "Oh, yes! I mean it. You have a regal face, Merze; but if it were a little less so it would be more charming. It is too cold."

"So sorry it is not to your taste," she murmured, glancing at her reflection in a mirror opposite.

"Oh, it is to my taste!" he said, lighting a cigar and leaning back to enjoy it. "That style of thing is very much to my taste on canvas or in marble—a perfect model for an Antigone or something of that sort; but I wonder if Antigone ever unbent or relaxed, even in the bosom of her family?"

She flung her hand out impatiently, but said nothing.

"It is lucky for me," he went on, calmly, "that I am not an impetuous young lover. If I were, jealousy might

crop out from the accepted idea that there is always someone to whom a woman is not ice. But you have never had any school-girl love affair, I suppose?"

"No," she answered, "I have never had a lover."

"And never have dreamed over some handsome face seen through the palings of the school grounds? No," he added, as she shook her head smilingly, "of course not. If you ever had had a love affair you would have more patience with the rest of mortals. As it is, you have a sort of fine contempt for our pitiable weaknesses. There are women like that until the weakness touches themselves, and then——"

A silence followed, broken by her rising quickly and walking to the window. For awhile she stood looking out into the gas-lit street below, where the crowds were hurrying to and fro through the white flakes that were falling fast. She drew her fingers across her forehead in a perplexed way, and then, closing the curtains again, came back and stood beside him, her hands clasped loosely before her.

"Mr. Lawrence," she said, as a child might say it, just so uncertain of her theme or words to use, "what is it? *I* don't know. I try to do what I think you want me to, always; but I know you are not satisfied with me. If, instead of speaking in that sarcastic way, you would tell me plainly my deficiencies, I would try to remedy them; I would indeed, for I always want you to know I am not ungrateful for all you have done. Please tell me what you want me to do and be."

He looked at her standing there, and did not fail to note that even in her earnestness she never unclasped her hands to reach them toward him—did not even let them touch the chair he sat in.

"My dear Merze," he said, smiling up into her serious eyes, "there are some things a man can't teach his wife without a loss to his own vanity. My vanity is very dear to me; let it rest in peace."

"Oh!" she burst out, dropping into the chair. "That is always the way! Why can't you be serious? I am in earnest. Why don't you tell me?"

"Because I can't," he said, dropping his light tone and looking at her earnestly. "It would be of no use. If your own heart does not tell you, I could not make you understand. Sometime you may, but it will be someone else who will teach you. Now don't get huffy," as she threw up her head with an angry movement. "It is the truth; three months as your husband has taught me that."

"What do you mean by 'someone else'?"

"Never mind what I mean, my dear. If the time ever comes you will know what I mean. But in the meantime, don't glare at me like a Medusa. There is no reason why we shouldn't be good friends, though you have not found out what it is to be in love with your husband. Never mind; I am philosopher enough to know you can't help it; so let's drop the subject, and—come give me a kiss—a something, by the way, with which you have never favored me except at my request."

She came over to him and stooped to touch his lips, but the square set of the jaws told him her teeth were locked closely.

He looked at her half compassionately, and then laid his hand over hers.

"By heavens, it's a shame!" he muttered; "but I don't see any clear way out of it. Go away! leave me alone, and go to your room."

She looked a little startled at the brusque tones so foreign to him, but turned without question and left him there. He watched the graceful form until the door closed between them, then he flung the half-consumed cigar into the fire with an imprecation.

"Curse the luck !" he muttered. "How was I to know it would be like this? How was I to know she would not be like others? Any other woman—but pshaw !" he continued, stalking back and forth over the soundless floor, with apparent disgust at his own thoughts, "pshaw ! why should she, after all? As well ask myself why her young beauty cannot draw me to her—cannot even erase the memory of a face with not half her loveliness. I was a fool to dream that it might," and then he dropped into a chair before the fire, out of patience with his lot and the luck which had driven him to it. "But I could not help it," he continued; "there was nothing else to be done. And how beautiful she is ! By Jove ! if she could only be brought to look on things in a sensible light, what assistance her face and accomplishments might be ! But how would she take it? Bad, I am afraid. Still, who knows? she is Jack's daughter."

Merze sat in the dusk of her own room, thinking as deeply, though more quietly than Lawrence. She had thought so much, so very much, since her marriage that the fits of wild, impotent rebellion had well-nigh passed away.

"Of what use was it?" she asked herself, wearily, "of what use?" She was his wife, nothing could alter that, she supposed; but, oh, how she hated the title ! and this thing of dread called marriage, sanctified by the church, linked by the words of poets to that dreamed-of love ! The dawn often crept into her window finding there

a woman with open eyes, sleepless through a horror of her life, with a dread of the days she had yet to live through, and thinking of that other soul to whom she was linked irrevocably. If she could only go away by herself and work—do anything to erase the memory of the past three months! But she could not tell him that. Had he been less kind and thoughtful of her welfare it would have been easier; as it was, she knew the fault was not his, but hers—her own nature which she had tried to govern in vain. She wondered if to all women came this bitter rebellion at their lot, and if so, how they lived on and on.

She was as one who had walked all her life through cool, shady paths, with sweet conceits and pure thoughts for her companions. In one day the fancies so dear to her were dispelled. Under her feet were bare, hard stones, about her the hot, dry winds, and overhead a burning, brassy sky that seemed to absorb all moisture of soil and air and all sweetness of the years to come.

Yet she did not dislike him. She was grateful for every kindness, and tried so hard to be different toward him, for she felt that his care of her deserved more of a return than she could make, and the sense of her failure filled her with an intense dissatisfaction with herself that left her moody and cold.

None now could compare her to the tiger lilies, for the charm of fire and sparkle, of girlish independence, was gone—buried under the shadow of a wedding ring.

"Ah!" she thought, with an indrawn shiver that was half a sob, "if only it could have been different! If only dada had not clasped our hands that night, I could have gone away alone and done something; I don't know what —I can't even think now! I had so many half-formed

plans of what I would make my life; so many vague ambitions; and now they seem as if they had been the fancies of someone else. They have died out of my life—the life that has become hateful to me and is of no use to anyone else!"

If only she had seemed of any use she would not have felt so empty-handed; if she could have helped him in any way, done anything to make amends for the aversion she felt at their relations. But there seemed nothing. They lived in a hotel, so there were no home cares to attend to. When she had asked to write his letters or assist him in any way, he had replied that his correspondence was generally of too private a nature to bear the inspection of a wife, and there the subject dropped.

She wondered much as to the nature of the correspondence and the business to which it referred. She knew he went to many cities. Often he was away all night, and sometimes for several days; and she fancied he must be wealthy to live in such fine rooms, and afford the handsome dresses he had insisted on purchasing her. She demurred at the extravagance at first, but he had said: "Never mind; it's no more for you than for myself. If I must have a woman around me, she must look presentable; so take all you can get, my dear, for luck makes sudden changes sometimes."

She had broached the subject of his income, but he had evaded answering, and, regarding his family, he had said: "I have no one, no living relative save one cousin, an old man now. So you and I are entirely without family, responsible to none, lords of ourselves in all things."

They had remained in Baltimore for three months. The hotel life was new to Merze, with the crowds of

ever-changing faces, many of which turned admiringly toward the quiet, distinguished-looking girl with the wide gray eyes and the face too cold for her years.

Often he had spoken to her in that sarcastic way which she felt had in it an element of dissatisfaction with herself, but never so plainly as to-night. Evidently something had put him out of his usual smooth temper. A light tap at her door was followed by his entrance.

"Merze," he said, stopping in the doorway, not seeing her for the darkness of the room.

"Yes," she answered; "I will be there at once."

He did not heed the half-expressed protest against his entrance, but came over in the direction of her voice.

"Are you here?" he asked, groping with outstretched hands until he touched her chair, then her shoulder. "And all in darkness? Come, don't sulk because I was a bit rough; no doubt you think me a brute, anyway. Wives generally feel so toward husbands they have no love for." He could feel her shrink and draw away under his touch and his words. "Well, well, we won't speak of that, though if you are willing to look at it in a sensible light we may come to a compromise on this question of relationship; so try and find your tongue. I want to talk business with you."

She rose and lit the gas, flooding all the room in a light that dazzled after the darkness.

"What is it?" she asked, turning to him.

He started as if to speak, and then stopped. Was there something in the girl's face that checked him in the thing which he felt would be a shame to them both? She was looking at him questioningly, with eyes tired as if by weight of unshed tears. Something in them caused the blue, keen eyes to drop and wander from her gaze.

"Well, never mind," he answered. "Some other time will do; you don't look well or very bright, so we won't bother about it now. Put on your things and we'll go to the theatre; that is always a treat to you; so come along." His tone was rather brusque, but under it Merze detected a something the brusqueness was meant to hide.

"What is it?" she asked. "You are annoyed or worried. Is it about me? Can I help you?"

"Would you if you could?"

"Indeed I would, I promise you that," she answered, wondering a little at the curious, searching look in his eyes, as if he were measuring her.

"You promise me," he repeated, looking at her closely. "But how much of a test will your promise stand?"

"You should know something of that," she remarked, coldly. "You should remember promises of four years ago that have never been broken, though it was little more than a child who made them."

"You're right, Merze," he said, decidedly; "you have kept your promise. Well, we'll speak of this other affair again, and see how much your later promises will amount to."

CHAPTER XI.

"So *this* is what you want?"

It was three hours later. She stood before him, her cloak dropped at her feet, the light flashing on the purple dress she had worn to the theatre, and in which she looked more an Antigone than ever, as she stood there, pale, contemptuous, decided.

For once their places were reversed. He had attempted

the old careless bravado, but the clear scorn in her eyes made him drop his own.

"Come, come, Merze! Don't go into tragedy. You look as if you should be doing that sort of thing, but it is very uncomfortable in a domestic circle. Drop it, and look at this in a sensible light. It is only what plenty of women have done. You have everything in your favor, and neither of us has family connections to consider. It means money to us both—plenty of it, perhaps, in time; enough to keep up two houses so that we could live in comfort apart. Surely that should be an inducement!" he added, half bitterly.

She threw out her hand impetuously.

"No need to bring that question up," she broke in. "I will try to do my duty so far as I know it. If our lives are to be lived out together, I will try to make yours contented. But this thing you have proposed is one I must judge for myself. I would beg in the streets rather than be the cause of such misery as I have seen in my own home. It is a waste of words. I will not do it."

He looked at her doggedly, yet in half admiration for all. It was the first time since their marriage that he had seen anything but a passively cold creature in her. He had hoped for some change; yet, now that it had come, anger against her had come with it.

"The business was good enough for your father and mother," he said, coolly; "I don't see why you should object to it in a husband."

"You have no right to mention my mother's name in this," she said, her voice a little tremulous. "She may have been passive in the matter; she never was very strong; but I know she never aided in it, never lured poor fools on to lose their money, as you would have me do."

"Oh, nonsense, Merze! No need to put it like that. You need have nothing to do with the games; all I ask is help to make the house pleasant to my friends. I don't want a place with the reputation of a gambling-house; that frightens the sort I want. But in Washington, with my experience and a woman as clever and charming as you can be if you choose, we could establish a *salon* that would make our fortunes."

"Yes, with a curse on every dollar."

"Well," he said, looking at her complacently, "the curses seem to have agreed with you for the past four years."

"You mean——" she began, and then sat down helplessly, as she saw she had guessed the truth.

"Yes," he answered, decidedly, as if glad to have it over with. "I mean just that. It is the only profession I have, so you may as well get used to it first as last. You lived so the most of your life; no need to take on this air now."

"If I have, it was when too young to help myself or when I did not know; but I could never live so again—never!"

"Oh, yes, you will," he said easily, coming over to her. "Women are always glad to have luxuries about them, without asking their source."

"Not those who have memories of a childhood such as mine," she replied, as her thoughts went back to that scene in Jack's room long ago. And again she seemed to see the white, set face of that boy from the Alleghenies; again the anguish of his broken whispers came to her ears; and, as Lawrence laid his hand on her shoulder, she sprung from under it as if it had been a snake.

"Don't touch me; don't come near me!" she panted. "Not now, at least. Wait—wait until I can think!"

She was walking back and forth, clasping and unclasping her hands despairingly. He, watching her moodily, noted the flash of a ring on one slim finger—the old opal in its circle of brilliants. As he saw it there came to him the memory of that day when it was placed there—the day Jack saved his life and gave Merze into his charge, and, looking at it, the bitterness died out of his face.

"Poor, unlucky devil of a Jack," he thought; "and poor girl, who has tried so hard to be a wife!"

"Come, Merze!" he said at last, rather brusquely; "don't take it so hard, and, for heaven's sake, don't look at me with eyes like that! We'll drop the subject if you say so. You are not suited either to the life or myself. Well, you can bid good-bye to both in the future. There! I don't think I am such a bad husband since I try to do that much. You should credit me with that, at least."

"I do, indeed I do," she said, stopping in her walk, though not exactly catching his meaning; "and I have never disliked you. I have always been grateful for your care and kindness. I like you, if only——I did not have to be married."

"Well, rest easy," he answered, bitterly, rising and going over to the window; "you need be married no longer. You are free, so far as I am concerned."

"*Free!*" She sat down, covering her face with her hands. She felt like a bird that had beaten against its bars until one had given way and let it outside the cage. But with the suddenness of the freedom there came a sense of loss that could not be defined. The world was

before her ; but in what corner of it was she to live and work? She had as little knowledge of it as the bird would have—the bird that dies when freed from the hated cage.

"Yes, free. After to-night we could not live together as we have done. In your dislike for my work you have shown more dislike for me personally than you intended to, perhaps, and——"

"I am sorry. I did not mean to hurt you that way——"

"There! Never mind what you meant ; I am not thin-skinned. If I were a younger man I might be in such a case ; but, as it is, the time for that is past with me."

He sat silent after that, looking in the fire, and she, watching him, could say nothing.

Was there a half regret in his voice for the youth that was gone? It sounded so to Merze. He had never seemed to her as anything but a young man. A certain youthful jauntiness made people forget his years. But, looking at him with his words still in her ears, she saw that he told the truth when he said his youth was gone, and she felt, in some way, that his happiness had gone with it. Perhaps—perhaps she had been selfish in not thinking of that. She rose, and came close to his chair. His eyes were gazing steadily into the red mass, but she could see that they were unconscious that the fire was there.

"Mr. Lawrence," she began, laying her hand on his arm, as he looked up at her and then dropped his eyes to her hand—a pretty hand. He raised it in his own and let it fall at her side.

"There, my girl, you need do penance no longer. I never knew until to-night how severe it has been for you.

Many women get accustomed to married lives without love. You are not one of that kind, unluckily for us both. But that is no reason why we should not be on good terms, if the disgust for my work does not extend to myself. I am too old to change that now."

"That is what I wanted to speak of," she said, her voice still tremulous from excitement and anxiety. "Please don't be vexed with me. I can't help the way I felt when you wanted me to help in the—with your work. You have done it always, and don't feel about it as I do. But I could live no longer on money earned so."

"Well, I don't see how we can change that. You are free, if you choose; but you must be taken care of. The promise to do so was not given to you alone, but to Jack."

"Yes, I know; but—can't I, some way—won't you let me take care of myself?"

He smiled sarcastically at the disjointed words.

"You are so anxious to break all bonds between us, eh? How soon will you want a divorce?"

"Never!" she said, looking at him steadily, with the earnestness of youth's innocence in her eyes. "I want to do something for myself, some work; but I know so little of what to do. I don't like your profession, but I always have been, I always will be, grateful for your friendship. If there were a divorce, that would mean never to see or know each other, wouldn't it? I would not want that. I would want you always to be my first friend."

"Your first friend?" he repeated. "How long would I remain so? Until some lover comes, perhaps. That is always a woman's first friend, though it may not be the best."

"I don't want a lover, ever!" she said decidedly, impatiently. She could see nothing of sweetness or brightness in this thing which she fancied lived only in the imagination of poets. She was as yet color-blind to the passions. "I want no lover. Husbands should not speak of lovers to their wives, and I will be your wife and your friend just the same, though we do live apart."

He smiled as he heard her, this man who had known women so well, and who knew, though love had never touched her, it would come as surely as the level sea swells moonwards; and, perhaps—perhaps it might not bring happiness into her life. If any harm should come to her through being left to herself he would feel regret. She was Jack's daughter, and, after all, had done her best as well as she knew. She was not the sort to be of use in the way he had hoped. Still, that need not affect his friendship for her.

He was unscrupulous in many ways; his life and work had made him so. But back of it was a vein of justice that told him the girl was right in her decision, and that also held him to his trust regarding her.

If it had been a woman he loved, he would not have looked on it in the same light. There could have been no thought of platonic friendship for her after knowing how distasteful the marriage with him was. But there had been no love—only a sort of an idea that it would be all right anyway; that idea had been speedily dispelled, and he felt it was best to be ended. So he thought, sitting there silent, and the girl opposite as still as himself.

It had all been said. They were never again to be the same, and the sense of the change had dropped over them both like a veil through which they could not see their

way into the future. It seemed a pity, all of it—from the first, a pity. And, looking across at the drooping, girlish form, that seemed too slight as yet to bear its burden alone, a moisture crept into his keen eyes. Was it altogether for this woman, or was it the memory of a scene like this that he had shared in years agone?—a woman almost as young, and so burdened with a loveless union that, in the glow of a red firelight, they had spoken words that changed their lives for all time—despairing, love-freighted words, with a sense of guilt in them. And after it had all been said—all the passion that had been growing in their hearts until it crept to their lips—then they had sat silent, just so, with faltering hearts and tongues grown dumb.

As the likeness to the scene crept into his thoughts he brushed back his hair from his forehead as if to throw off some weight of memory.

"Her life shall never be like that, if I can help it," he thought; and then he turned to her, his voice sounding strange after that throbbing silence as he said:

"Come, Merze, don't sit there. Go to bed. I am going away to-night, and will try and be back to-morrow. Then we can speak further of this question of living apart; but you must remain here until I have time to look around. Now, go to bed. This will all come straight; don't fret."

"Very well," she answered, rising to go to her room. At the door she paused irresolutely. He stood in the centre of the room, his hands in his pockets in a nonchalant fashion, not looking at her. She turned and touched his arm.

"Good-night, and—and—thank you."

He looked into her eyes that lowered before his own.

Since their relations had been severed she had twice touched him voluntarily with her hand, an act rare enough to attract his notice; but he understood well that it was only through a gratitude that was half remorseful.

"Good-night, my girl. Don't worry; don't have any regrets. We will start on a different footing now, and it may come all right for you in the end. I hope so. Good-night."

CHAPTER XII.

When Merze awoke next morning it was with a startled feeling that something had happened—what was it? There was a white glare in the room from the sun that was shining on the snow, fallen the night before, and her window-curtains were apart, letting in the flood of light.

That seemed strange. Mr. Lawrence was always careful to close the curtains because of draughts; and then, like a flash, came the remembrance of the night before.

She was alone. With the night had passed away the old life. Was the white, pure light of morning a symbol of what the future was to be? She was not a praying woman—too many doubts and different theories had obscured the vision of the soul; but she clasped her hands close over her eyes and wished that it might be so.

Into her thoughts came the memory of her husband's face as she had seen it on bidding him good-night. Kind it had been, and considerate he surely had proven himself, despite that proposition about the gambling-house. That, of course, was shameful; and with the memory came bitter thoughts against him. She had

felt that she hated him when he spoke of it to her—his wife! And yet he had not seemed to think of it as a crime; he said other women had done it; but she felt that it must have been women who had that thing which they called "love" for their husbands, and it had blinded them to all else.

To him it was a profession the same as any other. Custom had given him a sort of pride in his skill. He had no idea of the way it would impress her, and her scorn and contempt had stung him into some rough speeches that were very unlike his usual manner; but it had only been for a few moments, and then he had been most kind. She remembered it all as she lay there, and the kindness remained uppermost in her thoughts, and made her feel half guilty at her happy sense of freedom.

She wondered what he meant to do. With the knowledge that she was to be free, there had come back with a rush the old girlish dreams of a life to be carved out for herself—a life in which marriage was to form no part—for where it came everything beautiful in life was marred in her eyes. But in what path was her life-walk to be?

She sat up in bed, taking stock of herself as it were. In the school she had been considered very clever, and she knew she was well qualified for teaching, if that met her liking. But it did not; the routine would drive her desperate. She could sing well; but felt she was not thorough musician enough to turn that to account as a profession, and to complete her musical education would take more money than she could accept now. She had aptitude as an artist, and had done some of the best work in the school; but she smiled to herself at the thought of competing with acknowledged artists. She

knew she possessed taste ; but felt that talent was wanting—such talent as was necessary to decided success, and in whatever direction her work lay she could not be content with mediocrity. So she thought in her ignorant girl's heart, that had so little knowledge of the hardships in a profession even with genius to lend aid.

What was there left her in an ideal profession ? for it must be that. What was it he had said she was fitted for last night ? Tragedy—the stage ! A mirror was opposite ; she looked at the reflection long and steadily, picked out her good and bad points critically. Her voice had been praised as one admirably suited to elocution. She had played no parts even in amateur clubs, but her dramatic reading had been rather startling to the young ladies who invariably chose some of the milder things of Tennyson when the day for reading came. And now, if it could be so, why not ?

Her blood glowed at the thought of it. Surely, surely she could do it. She felt as if no work would be too great if in the end she could only win success. There came thronging quick into her mind the poets, the dramatists, whose work she loved and enjoyed. Oh, if she could only feel herself worthy to interpret them ! That surely would be noble work. "Good" work *he* would have called it. And the man in her thoughts was her oracle of the Turkish pipe.

Hurriedly dressing, she picked up a volume of dramatic poems, and walked back and forth, reading aloud favorite portions, wondering if she could do it well, rereading some, and attempting to act them to her own satisfaction. She felt them, and the blood throbbed through her veins in sympathy with the characters she was endeavoring to render ; but she knew her work was

crude. She would need someone to teach her how to use what strength she had, for, as it was, she dropped the book and found that she was nervous and trembling from the intensity of her own emotions.

She looked at herself in the glass and laughed a little as the ridiculous side of the situation struck her; but the laugh was a half-hysterical one.

"How silly I would appear if anyone could see me!" she thought; "tears in my eyes from Guinevere's parting scene, and my hands trembling! How silly, and yet how thankful I would be if I could only convey to others what I felt just then!"

The morning was one of suppressed excitement to her; and how slow it was in passing! And at last, when a knock came at her door, she hurried to open it, her face eager and a little flushed.

Lawrence noticed it and smiled. "The brightest look of welcome I have ever received from you," he remarked, seating himself leisurely, and looking at her as she drew back confusedly. "Well, since I am a discarded husband, I am thankful for even small favors. Sit down; why, you are nervous. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing," she answered, hastily, sitting as he bade her. "I was reading aloud, and am a little tired, perhaps."

"It must have been very interesting reading," he commented, looking at her curiously. "Ah! 'Guinevere'!" as he saw the open volume; "very appropriate. Only we have no 'Launcelot' yet."

"And we will not have," she answered, trying to speak lightly. "Don't be sarcastic. Tell me the result of your journey."

"How flattering your interest! There, there!" as she

tapped her foot impatiently. "We will talk business then. My journey has not been a long one; only down across the Virginia line. How would you like to live in the country for awhile?'

"In the country, where?"

"In Virginia. I have a half-interest in an old place there which was left to my cousin and myself, but has never been divided yet, and none of us has lived there since my grandfather's death. I telegraphed Mark last night that I might want to use it, and he has replied that it is at my service; but I warn you it will be dull."

"Who is Mark?" She had never heard him mention the name before.

"A cousin of mine, Mark Guarda. The remnant of the plantation is jointly ours, but of course I communicated with him before taking possession. Later, something else may be arranged, but that is the best I can do now."

"Will it be much expense to you?" She was so helpless, yet so afraid of adding any annoyances to him.

"Never mind about that—no," he added, as he saw her look of protest; "it won't be as much as your living here. Two of the old darkies take care of the place, and you will be little extra trouble; and as to expense—the place keeps itself up, so you will have to use none of the money that is so distasteful to you."

It was a lie, but he knew she would be more contented so. The old place had been neglected so long, and without any resident master, that it at times had come far short of keeping itself up.

"I will go," she answered, "for the present, at least; there are many things I could do in the way of study

while there, and I want to learn as quickly as possible to work for myself in some way. I could work and study better there than here in the hotel, much better."

"And pray, what do you intend to study? I thought you were through school."

"I think I would like to learn something at which I could make my own living. Don't laugh at the idea, please; but I think I would like to go on the stage, to be an actress, if I could."

She was so fearful of her ground, so afraid of his ridicule, that her speech was very disjointed, and her face flushed under his quizzical smile.

"Well, really, my modest Merze, your ambition is not a trifling one. You speak of the stage with the confidence of ignorance. What made you think of it?"

"Is it so foolish?" she asked, a little crushed. "I was all alone this morning, thinking what I should do, and all at once it came into my head as if someone had whispered it to me. You would have been amused had you seen me walking back and forward, reading some of those dramas aloud to see if I could do it right."

"And how did you succeed?"

"Not very well, I am afraid. I got too nervous."

"Ah!" looking at her more carefully. "Nervous; how was that? What made you nervous?"

"I don't know," she answered, weakly. "When I think of it now, I can't understand it. But just then, when I was reading it and trying to act it as well as I could, a trembling came over me, a nervousness so I could scarcely stand. I dropped into a chair and looked at myself in the mirror there. The tears were in my eyes and my heart was in my throat for a moment. It seems foolish now to think of it, but just then I forgot I was

myself ; I seemed 'Guinevere'. Does that seem so silly to you ?"

He did not answer at once. He sat with his eyes half closed, looking at her ; then he said : "I am not sure, but if you will bring me a cigar I will smoke and think it over."

She rose and moved over to a stand where his smoking set was kept. He watched the graceful dignity of her carriage. It was a pleasure to watch Merze walk ; there was the freedom of the hills in her gait, the unstudied grace of an unconscious woman, and his half-closed eyes noted every point in feature and figure as she came across to him all unknowing that the cigar was only a ruse to give him the opportunity to inspect her with the idea of this new ambition of hers in his mind.

"Light it for me," he said, and leaned back watching her still as she did it, and laughed as she handed it to him.

"Thanks. You do it cleverly enough, but it does not suit your Greek features and statuesque figure. That sort of thing needs a woman with dash and sparkle in her to make the picture complete. A 'Galatea' you might be—never anything nearer humanity. There, go away now. Have the girl pack up your things. I will take you down to Greyholme in the morning, and I will think over this new ambition of yours. Don't build any air-castles yet."

"But you will help me if you can—for dada's sake ?"

"Yes, I will help you if I can—for Jack's sake."

CHAPTER XIII.

Clear, crisp air and white-sheeted fields met Merze as she stepped from the car to the little covered platform of the flag station, with not a house in sight. Some of the passengers looked curiously at the handsome girl in brown traveling-dress as she stood beside her companion, gazing about with questioning eyes at her surroundings; and then the train puffed away, and its inmates turned again to their papers, their chat, and their cigars. As it did so humanity made itself manifest on the other side of the track, where a sleigh was drawn up, and the driver, an old darky, was holding the heads of a pair of horses and trying to shame one of them out of a fright.

"Whoa, now! Stan' still, you June! Ain't yeh 'shamed o' yerself? A-tryin' to show off, ain't you, jest 'cause Massa Fred's come home? Whoa, now! Howde, massa? I'll be dar in a minute. Have to git June coaxed round a little; seems if she nevah will git used to dem keers. Yeh stay right whar yeh is, so's Miss won't git her feet wet. I'll bring 'em round. Dar, now, June! dar now! Massa Fred's a-laughen at yeh. Hain't yer got no sense? Dar, now! knowed ye'd get 'shamed o' yerself. Good girl, good girl! Git around, now; dar yeh go; whoa!"

And the sleigh was brought around with a flourish to the little platform, and the driver got out nimbly as stiffened limbs would allow, and stood, hat in hand, to welcome the arrivals.

"Good morning, Uncle Jupe. Merze, this is one of the last relics of our departed grandeur. He has a multitude of high-sounding names, but, Jupiter being the shortest among them, we call him, 'Jupe,'" said Lawrence, while assisting her into the sleigh.

"Don't yeh take no 'count o' the rest o' them names Miss. I's ben 'Uncle Jupe' to three gineration o' Lawrences, an' I spect to be so the rest o' my days; an' mighty glad I am to give yeh welcome, Miss."

'Thank you," said Merze, holding out her hand. "I shall expect you to be 'Uncle Jupe' to me, also."

"The Good Man bless yo' sweet young face, an' make yeh happy in Grayholme," and the old mahogany-colored face was full of earnestness as he spoke. The girl's frank manner had evidently won his heart. And very warm hearts they have—those whose lives are lived under the curse.

Two miles over the snow, on which the sun shone until the earth seemed sown with diamonds, glittering, flashing, and ever vanishing to give place to new ones. The pair, husband and wife that had been, sat silent during the ride. What a home-coming! Was he thinking of it? Merze glanced at his non-committal face, but it told nothing.

On they went, now out between open fields, now under drooping pine boughs weighed down by their snowy burden, until at last they entered a high old-fashioned gate. And Merze looked eagerly about to see in what manner of place it was that her lot was cast for the time. Very bare it looked, except for the dark-green of the pines that were thick about. The network of vines over the rough, graystone house was leafless, and the choicest shrubs in front of it were enveloped in straw. An

antique-looking fanlight above the door was made of brass and set with tiny slits of glass. The stone steps were worn in the centre, showing long use ; the windows were shutterless, and sparkled in the sunlight as Jupe drew up with a flourish ; and the door was opened by a neat, shining-visaged old woman, who stood smiling broadly down on them.

"Welcome, Massa Fred, welcome, Miss," she said, in the mellow voice of her race, as he opened a door to the left, and Merze was led by her husband into the quaint old parlor.

"I bid you welcome, also," he said, as he drew a chair near the blazing logs in the open fireplace. "Here, Rhoda, take the wraps of your mistress. I give her in your charge ; try and make her comfortable."

"I don't spect it'll be any labor to do dat, Massa Fred. It do seem good to have a lady in the house again—'specially a young lady. Dar's ben nothin' but ole faces an' ole voices in dese rooms for so long dat a young face is mighty welcome, I can tell yeh, Miss."

"Thank you, Rhoda. I feel sure my stay with you will be a contented one," and the smile in the girl's eyes was met by an answering one on the blackwoman's face. She would at least have friends in Jupe and Rhoda. She looked around curiously at the odd room. She had lived in many houses, but this was different from anything she had seen. Age in buildings had always—through memories of her childhood—been associated in her mind with ricketiness and general decay ; but this was all different. It surely was very old ; but it was a polished, picturesque old age, and one that appealed to the girl's love of the quaint. The woodwork was of mahogany, the doors of plain panels, and the frames of

carved work that was clumsy yet effective as the light glanced over the scroll-work, touching here and there the mimic grapes or the carved leaves. The floor was of dark wood, with a few rugs of faded hue and a white bearskin before the fire. Shabby the furniture was, and the darned damask of curtains and upholstery had faded from maroon to brown tinges; but for all that it was an impressive shabbiness—that of fallen kings.

Lawrence watched her wandering eyes as they glanced from point to point in the old room.

"Well," he remarked at last, "how do you like your retreat?"

"It is lovely!" she said, rising and going to the window. "I wonder you ever leave it or neglect it as it seems to be. I should never get tired looking at it if the other rooms are as handsome as this."

"They are all old-fashioned and queer, but this has the richest woodwork. It was quite a show-place in its day, but its day is long past. I have no particular affection for or pleasant memories of it. I have not been in it since my grandfather's death, ten years ago. Mark's business keeps him in New York, but he manages to get down once or twice a year. He takes much more interest in it than I do. I expect to sell out to him some of these days."

Merze glanced at a few old pictures on the walls, and asked:

"Did your mother live here? You never mention her."

"Because I never knew her; she died before I could remember. Yes, she lived here, and there is a picture of her upstairs. It and that ring you wear are the only mementos I have of her. And, by the way," he

added, "I would like for you always to wear the ring. It is safer in your hands than mine, for I have pawned it more than once when I got hard up. I might do so again and lose it. I shouldn't like that, so you keep it.

Just then Rhoda re-entered, and said to Merze:

"Yo' room is ready, Miss, any time yeh wants to go to it. I hadn't much time to 'range it, but reckon it'll be comfortable, though the furnishin' is all gettin' mighty pore-like o' late years," she added, apologetically.

"Give me a list of what is needed, and I'll see about it to-morrow," said Lawrence.

"Laws, Massa Fred, yeh ain't a-goin' back that soon!" ejaculated Rhoda, with the freedom of a privileged character.

"Yes, auntie, I am going back on the next train; so I have only time to take a lunch with you and leave at once—there, there!" as she began a pantomime of expostulation. "Show your mistress to her room, and then come back here; I want to see you."

A pretty room it was, for all Rhoda's apologies, that Merze was shown to. Snowy white curtains and bed-furnishing made the place look chilly in the clear, cold light of the winter sun; but the crackle of burning wood drew her attention to an irregular little alcove, in which was a fireplace filled with blazing hickory that sent a shower of sparks upward as Rhoda assailed it with a cumbrous brass-headed poker.

"Seems like it takes a mighty long time to git these heah ole walls warmed through. This fiah's ben a-burnin' since yisterday. But lor! it's the fust time they's ben a fiah heah since ole massa died; an' as for a lady—

there wan't none in the house fer a long time afore that. It'll seem like old times agin. Anything I can do for yeh?"

"Nothing now," answered Merze. "I will get along very well, and Mr. Lawrence is waiting to see you."

"Yes, Miss; so if yeh'll 'scuse me I'll go right along, foi Massa Fred nevah was easy to keep a-waitin', even when he was a little pickaninny. I's his mammy, and has a right to know ef anybody has. Yes, Miss, I'll go right along down," and giving the fire a parting punch, she trotted out of the room and down stairs to where Lawrence awaited her.

"I wanted to speak to you about Miss Merze, Rhoda."

"Yes, Massa Fred."

He walked back and forth a couple of times before speaking again, while Rhoda stood like a grotesque figure in bronze, with the fitful blaze of the wood throwing gleams across her features with Rembrandt-like effects. Finally he spoke:

"She will be alone here, except for you and Jupe, and will never complain though there should be discomforts. I shall trust you to let me know anything that is needed."

"Yes, Massa Fred."

"And I suppose I can also trust you not to talk too much?"

"Yes, Massa Fred."

"Tell Jupe to have the horses ready in an hour."

"Yes, Massa Fred."

But she did not move toward the door; her eyes were on his face questioningly. There was silence for a little while in the quaint old room, and then the blackwoman broke it.

"Massa Fred."

"Well?"

"Don't think it's for'ard-like o' me, but try an' 'member as I'm yer ole mammy. I know as how yo' 'countable to none; but yo' motha's pictuah's up dar in that room whar young Miss is to sleep. It's de fus' time a lady has slep under this roof for many a yeah, an' then it didn't bring any blessin'. Now, don't yeh git mad with old Rhody," as he turned sharply on her. "I's nothin' but a mis'able, worn-out niggah, an' yeh was only a boy at the time, so don't think I'm a-jedgin' of yeh; but yeh ain't no boy now, Massa Fred, an' yeh jest say 'this am Miss Merze,' and that's all. Yeh don't say ef she's any kin, er ef she isn't, an' folks is goin' to ax questions of us niggahs when they see her here, an' what's we'uns to say? Yeh've had her put in yo' motha's room, Massa Fred. Yeh—yeh wouldn't o'done that ef she was like that othah."

"Silence! Never speak like that again!" and his face was flushed with anger as he turned to her.

"Now, Massa Fred," the old creature said, half-chidingly, half-lovingly, as she used to do when he was a child, "don't yeh be mad. It's only fer the name I'm a-thinkin'. Ole massa is gone, an' the ole place seems goin', an' it's all mighty pore-like to what it used to be; but the ole name is jest the same, an' we niggahs has allers been kind o' proud o' the ole name. Yeh knows dat, Massa Fred."

"Yes, yes, I know, auntie," he said, a little touched at this old creature's devotion to the family honor, while he himself scarcely remembered he had ever belonged to it. The dead and gone Lawrences were nothing to him, while to this black ex-slave their wishes, their honor,

were sacred. "Yes, you are right in your ideas; but there must be no disrespect given *her* name, remember that. As for this other, your new mistress, rest easy, Rhoda, on that score. She is Mrs. Lawrence, and I think will bring no discredit to the name."

"Well, I tell *yo'*, Massa Fred, I's mightly glad to hear it. A real mistress in the house at las' ! It'll be ole times ovah again."

"Don't build up too many hopes. My wife is to live here *alone* so long as she stays. There, there ! don't ask questions. Get us some lunch, and take care of her."

"Yes, Massa Fred, suahly," and she left the room with her old face puzzled over the interview.

"Can't und'stan' all of it," she confided to the tea-kettle, as she took it hissing from the hob. "Men is curious creatures, anyway. She's his wife, an' she's so queen-like, an' so han'some, an' he's goin' away to leave her all lonesome by herself. An' dar's that *othah* one, as was wicked as wicked ; an' he won't heah no word agin her after all these yeahs. Well, dar's no 'countin' for tastes, leastways men's tastes."

CHAPTER XIV.

Very quiet seemed the old house, with only the two servants, who looked at Merze curiously for all their kindness. She was so different from any of the Lawrence ladies who had been mistress there. She was so young, so charming in many ways, and had only smiles for them—but never gay, girlish smiles, such as suit young years. And the eyes, questioning as a child's,

had yet the sadness in them of a soul that feels itself alone—an outcast from such happiness as she felt came to other lives. In her own life there could be only the content of work well done. That was all she dared dream of; and of that she did dream, and build airy fabrics of beauty through the winter days that were far from idle. She read aloud much, conning over and over poems suited to elocution, working day after day at the most difficult, trying to school her voice to forcible, yet natural, delivery. She was working partially in the dark, not at all sure that her school training would be applicable to this more advanced ambition, but doing her best while waiting definite word from her husband. Only short notes had been sent her, to which no answers were required, and all of them came from New York. One day there came a package of play-books, in which some parts of a declamatory nature were marked as if by a hand conversant with the requirements of stage business. She wondered much who had done it; but from whatever source they came, she was thankful for the instruction she gained from them, and many a chat did Rhoda have with Jupe over the sound of their mistress' voice, heard talking to herself.

"Tell yo' what: 'tain't no ways natural for no young creature like that to be so lone like. No wonder she talks to herself when she thinks no one's in hearin'. I's goin' 'tell Massa' Fred 'tain't right, no ways. How's we niggahs to know but what she'll go crazy—seems mighty like it, I can tell yeh! She goes off on long walks by herse'f through the woods, not carin' fer rain, er sleet, er nothin'. Then she comes back an' talks loud an' cross sometimes in her room; an' when I open the door, thar she is as sweet as a lamb, an' always a smile

an' a soft word. But them smiles is all kindness, Jupe. They ain't happiness, no how."

"How yo' 'spect to know that? Wimen folks is allus a conjurin' up low-spirited things. Don't be 'maginin' things," advised her lord and master, over his bacon and sweet potatoes.

"I ain't a 'maginin'; I hain't no call to. She'll say, 'Ef yeh please, Rhody,' an' 'No thanky, Rhody,' with the smile so sweet on her face; but her eyes'll have a look in 'em that makes me feel like I wanted to be her mammy, an' tell her to just lay in my arms an' have a good cry, 'case I knows it 'ud do her a heap o' good."

"Fo' the Lawd's sake! That 'ud be a smart thing to say to a lady as yeh hav'n't knowed two weeks. But wimmen never have no fitten sense o' things."

And so they discussed Merze, while she put in her days studying, and waiting with impatience some definite word from her husband regarding the future. He had asked that she remain there for a few weeks until he had time to "look around," as he expressed it. It seemed weary waiting; but at last came a letter saying he was coming down for a day, and that his cousin was coming with him.

Great was the preparation in the kitchen, and many were the praises sung by Rhoda in honor of "Massa Mark." Merze heard the name so often that she wondered if she should ever be able to call him by any other.

"It's been many a day sence they both ben to the ole place at once," remarked Rhoda, "an' they's mighty night like to Jupe an' me. I was Massa Fred's mammy, an' my marm was Massa Mark's."

"Then your Massa Mark is the eldest," remarked Merze.

"Well, I should say so; twenty good yeahs er more; an' thar nevah was no one o' the ole family as good as Massa Mark as evah I seed. Good? He's jest been a heap more good to the Lawrences than the Lawrences evah was to him, though he did drap the name in a temper yeah's ago, an' has stuck to his mother's evah since, jest 'case ole massa didn't like her furren notions, an' 'ligion, an' all. But he's jest as good as the gole. My boy Zack died aside o' him, down thar in Georgy in wah times, an' massa had him took care of an' brought back to the ole place to be buried when the fighten was all ovah, an' I tell you we niggahs don't forgit it. Zack thought a heap o' freedom, but he thought a heap more o' Massa Mark."

Merze was curious to see this "Massa Mark," of whom they spoke with such love and reverence. She wondered as to his calling—if it was the same as his cousin's—but did not care to get her information through his servants, so did not question.

The day on which they were to come seemed long to her. She could not content herself to either read or study, for she felt that the day would bring some decision as to her future. At last she threw on a cloak with a hood attached, and, going out the side door, she walked down an old avenue of fir trees that led out to a by-lane connecting with the main road. She did not mean to walk far, but her impatience would not allow her to sit idly waiting. Jupe had just left for the station, and she knew it would be almost an hour before he got back.

It was March, but the promise of spring was in the air—just a touch of haziness and the twitter of birds flying to and fro with sweet chattering. The air was

exhilarating, intoxicating after the closeness of the house. Across the fields a man was ploughing, calling at times to his horses, singing and whistling as he worked. What a happy, care-free heart such a one must have, thought the girl as she heard him.

The wind, blowing toward her, seemed to bear in its breath the fresh odors of the upturned earth, or it might have been only the moisture rising from the ground where she stood ; but it brought tidings of springing grass and all sweet things of summer ; it was as the hints of change in her own life—a vague expectancy that tingled through her veins, and sent her restless here to the fields trying to outwalk her impatience.

When she turned to retrace her steps, she found they were more than she had intended taking. The house was easily a half mile away. She walked hurriedly back, that they might not find her out on their arrival. She had seen or heard nothing of the carriage. Yet it could have come while she was out of sight. Half-vexed at the absentmindedness that made her forget how far her feet were wandering, she hurried on, and reached, at last, the boundary of the old garden. As she did so the stooped form of a man, coming from the other end of the lane, turned also into the avenue. She tried to draw back unnoticed until he passed, but saw he was looking at her intently. She bent her head with a pleasant good-morning, such as is always given on the country roads, and would have passed him, but he lifted his hat in return to her salutation, and evidently satisfied with his scrutiny, spoke :

"I think I am not mistaken when I suppose you to be Fred's wife. Am I right ?"

Fred's wife ! How strange it sounded in her ears.

She stopped short, and looked at this stranger who spoke to her so familiarly. He had a peculiar face, darkly tinged and foreign-looking, and his hair was perfectly white—a soft, silky white that softened the features and heightened the lines of age. He seemed so at home under the old trees that it could only be one person.

"I am Mrs. Lawrence," she answered.

"Ah, yes! And you wonder who I am to accost you, eh?"

"No," she answered, smiling. "I am not much puzzled over it. I feel sure you must be 'Massa Mark,'" and she held out her hand, which he clasped warmly.

"What a clever pair of guessers we are!" he said, looking at her kindly, curiously. "And, if it were a younger man, we would say what promises of romance in this curious beginning to our acquaintance."

"And, without the romance, we can at least hope it will be a forerunner of a pleasant friendship," she replied, feeling instinctively drawn toward this peculiar old man with the musical voice and the sharp, kindly eyes.

"Amen to that!" And he again reached his hand, in which she unhesitatingly laid hers. Assuredly it was a strange beginning to a strange friendship.

"How does it come that you are alone, and on foot?" she asked, as they walked on under the fir-trees. "Jupe went to meet you."

"And I came with them to the end of the lane. I preferred getting out and taking the short cut across. It does one good to breathe the air here. I like to get out in it alone sometimes; but a few hours is enough of it. I have become demoralized through familiarity with the noise of elevated roads and other convenient monstrosities of civilization. This quiet is oppressive in

comparison, perhaps because its peace is a rebuke to the fret and fume of lives whose restless feet prefer the cobblestones, though they do leave bruises sometimes, eh? What do you think? What would be your choice, green pastures or a paving of cold stone? The pastures are peaceful, lovely."

"But the stones can be built into monuments," she answered. He looked at her and laughed. She had caught so quickly at his meaning; but he shook his head, though he did so kindly, smilingly.

"Monuments! Yes, yes. Youth always expects that, at least. Age is content with grave-room. Does that make you feel that I am very melancholy?" he asked, as she looked at him questioningly. "I am not, I assure you. Some people who know me call me 'Mephisto.' Now 'Mephisto' was not melancholy, was he, or have you any acquaintance with his character?"

"Not much," she answered, amused and interested in this man, who was so unlike anything she had imagined as her husband's cousin. "But," she added, "if any have called you so, it must have been by the rule of contraries. I have heard your name too often, through Rhoda's lips, to take you at your own valuation."

"Ah!" he breathed, with quaint sadness, "it is always so. Don't you know everyone has an ambition to *pose* in this life, some as one character, some as another, yet few understanding their own? In the theatre we see it most. Scarce a comedian who has not, at some time in his amateur days, longed to test his voice in the rôles of heaviest tragedy; scarce a soubrette who does not, in her soul, think herself fitted by nature to the 'Paulines' and the 'Juliets'; and so it goes. And I, though I insist that I have in me the instincts of a 'Mephisto', I must go

always into the parts of the benevolent father or uncle, who end the play with 'Bless you, my children, bless you!' Ah, it is very hard! I believe it is all the fault of the hair, that would insist on whitening. Sometimes I am tempted to dye it. What do you think?"

Merze laughed at the pretense of sadness in his voice, for his quizzical smile so belied it. He was so peculiar, yet so attractive to her. They seemed already on a footing of understanding seldom reached save by long acquaintance. They entered the side door just as the carriage drove up.

Rhoda stood on the steps, asking multitudinous questions as to the non-appearance of Massa Mark, and when he tiptoed behind her and put his hands over her eyes, as he had done when a boy, the old creature turned with a shrill cry of delight, and flung two tremulous black hands up to him:

"Massa Mark, Massa Mark!" she said, pressing his hands and kissing them—the hands that had closed Zack's eyes—while every feature in her face shone with delight. Assuredly Massa Mark was the favorite in the old house.

Merze looked on, amused and touched by the devotion in the black creature's manner, almost forgetting there was anyone else to greet, until Lawrence stood beside her holding out his hand.

"Am I an outcast? Have not even you, Merze, a word—a how-de-do?"

"Many of them," she said, her face flushing a little as she saw Guarda watching this greeting between Fred and his wife. His eyes seemed to see everything. She wondered if he knew—if Lawrence had told him.

CHAPTER XV.

All through dinner which followed, Lawrence was amused at the interest Merze had roused in the mind of his whimsical cousin, and he was pleased as well, for through friendship between them he saw his way clear of an obligation whose justice he acknowledged at the same time that the bonds grew irksome.

It was the old man who opened the door for her and smiled kindly into her eyes as she left the dining-room; then he turned squarely on the other.

"Fred," and the old face was no longer smiling, "you have told me the truth about this—she is your wife?"

"Certainly she is—more's the pity! Don't think me fool enough to try and humbug you in such a matter. Yes, she's my wife."

"Then what's wrong? Surely, Fred, you are not throwing away the content you might have? At your age a man should know how to appreciate a wife like that. She would be one in a thousand."

Lawrence laughed a little as he cracked a walnut and leisurely searched out the kernel.

"Now don't lecture, Mark. I didn't ask you to come for that. Besides it's all no good; we have settled our own affairs to our own satisfaction. The one question now is some occupation for her. She wants to be independent. I expected an unbiased critic in you as to her qualifications for the stage, but you seem entirely under her spell already."

"Which you are not, it seems."

"Not exactly."

"And she?"

"Is in the same agreeable state of affection toward myself."

"And she has no money?"

"Not a cent."

"Then I can't understand what possible motive you could have in marrying each other."

"Possibly not, and you are not likely to. It was all done for the best, Mark; believe that at least; but it has been a big mistake for both. To a man I suppose such things don't matter so much; but she feels it most, as she happens to be one of the sort who can't take things lightly."

"No honest woman could take such a state of affairs lightly. You should be thankful for that, since she bears your name. You have surely seen enough of women who take lightly the bond of wedding vows."

"Don't preach, Mark; you have never been bound by them. As to Merze—yes, she will always take things too seriously to be happy. Life must be intense and earnest to her, with the intensity of melodrama; but it is not a desirable trait in a wife."

"Melodrama?" repeated the old man, "well, perhaps; who can tell? But her eyes have in them the weakness and the strength of tragedies."

Lawrence laughed at the earnest tone.

"Assuredly, Mark, this is a decided 'case,' since you begin on a few hours' acquaintance to imagine such poetic things. She is handsome to look at, but beyond that she has never been particularly interesting to me. I am too prosaic ever to discover the germ of tragedies in her statuesque, still features. They have always looked

rather blank to me. I fear as an actress she would lack fire. She would never be a woman to compromise herself in any way; her sense of duty would be stronger than any temptation could become. Her husband can afford to have ease on that score."

Mark looked across at the careless, nonchalant face, a half feeling of wrath in his mind against it, and a great compassion for the loveless life of the girl who had just left them.

"You talk like a fool, Fred, and you are acting more like one in allowing her to go out alone into the world with a face like hers and an empty heart."

"And you have only a theory of her nature from her face, yet you are talking all sorts of imaginary nonsense over her. An empty heart! So much the better; she can give the more thought to her work. A lover is a sad interference."

"But a husband who has an honest interest in her work—surely such a one is best for a woman always."

"I fear Merze will not agree with you. A husband is the least desirable to her of all earthly things. There is no use discussing the question, Mark. She, herself, has asked to be free. It is not a flattering confession to make, but it is true, so you needn't look on her as a deserted woman, or any of that rubbish. No use going into details as to the cause; that is only of interest to ourselves. There is no sentimental nonsense between us, and there never was. I would have tried to be as good a husband to her as men of our sort can be, but it is of no use. She would get along with you all right. You could talk blank verse to each other. But there is no music to her in the name of wife, and never will be."

"Never will be? Time only tells such things, Fred. She

has a good face. I like it—like it well enough to fear that the music may reach her ears too late."

They both sat silent after Mark's last speech. It contained much that Lawrence had already taken into consideration, for all the lightness of his answers. At last he rose and asked :

"Shall we go to her?"

"Yes," said the old man, rising also. At the door he stopped and asked : "Have you decided?"

"Answer me a question first. Has she enough in her favor to succeed?"

"Yes. With only average intelligence and that face, voice, and magnetic manner she could be made a success. She has more than average intelligence, and if given a chance would, I think, win success in anything she determined to do. That is my honest opinion ; but I would not advise a public life for her."

"As to that, she must decide for herself."

And without more words the two men entered the room where Merze awaited them.

"You were very long coming," she said, making room beside her for Mark on the old-fashioned carved settee.

"We were talking of you," replied Lawrence, "and the subject grew quite interesting; hence our delay."

"I did not imagine myself of so much consequence," she said, as carelessly as she could, while her heart beat rapidly at the thought that it must be of the stage they spoke. Now, surely, she would hear something of the decision.

"Yes," said Lawrence, seating himself leisurely, "of you and this new ambition of yours. Mr. Guarda is something of an authority on such matters. Would you

mind reading aloud a little? It will give him a better idea of your voice than conversation can give."

She hesitated a moment, looking from one to the other. It was such an abrupt request—she was so totally unprepared—that at first she did not know what to say. Guarda laid his hand on hers kindly.

"Yes, child, the 'Mephisto' is a very harmless one. Read me a little something—anything; don't let the prospect frighten you. It is necessary that I hear before I can judge."

"I know that. I am not frightened, but it took me by surprise. I will be glad to read to you, but don't be too harsh in your criticism; remember I did not expect to entertain you so."

She was looking over some books as she spoke, not to Lawrence, but to Guarda. She wished her husband did not need to be there. She did not care nearly so much for the stranger's criticism as she did for his; yet she could not tell him so.

"Choose for me," she said, taking to Guarda three books; "perhaps you will know what is best."

He turned the leaves of one over. It was Meredith's 'Clytemnestra,' with all its beauty of music, all its coloring of passion.

"Read those speeches of 'Clytemnestra' and 'Agesthus,' also that chorus."

He handed her the book as she stood leaning one hand on the mantel. In that position she could not see Lawrence's face, so she remained there and began.

Her voice was not natural at first. There were harsh notes in it, and she was not sure enough of herself; but after a few speeches the earnestness in them took possession of her, and the words of the woman, great in her

strength, admirable even in her weakness, were given in pride, in taunts, in the sad relapse into memories of past happiness, in the many phases of a strange love endeavoring to raise its companion to the level of her own courage. The chorus, with its wail of prophecy in it, ended, dying out in the shadowy old room in which no word was spoken until she closed the book.

"Will that do? Is it enough?" she asked Guarda. She did not look at Lawrence, and he did not speak.

"It is enough—it will do," answered the old man, leading her to a chair with an added degree of impressiveness in his manner. "I thought you could do creditably. I did not hope to hear reading so good as you have given us."

"And do you think — is it likely I could be an actress?"

"You have much in your favor. I think I can safely say, if you are not afraid of hard work, yes."

"I am afraid of nothing if I only had hope that the work would be good; but—" and then she turned to Lawrence—"can I?—am I to try?"

"You are to choose for yourself. It will be work, as he says."

"But it will also be independence, and I will be so much more contented. I seem useless as it is."

"Don't build up too much on entire independence at first," said Guarda, shaking his head. "It will be some time before you can fly with your own wings."

"Is it—will it mean money — much expense?" she asked, fearful after all that it could not be.

"Nothing more than you can repay when your fortune is made," answered Lawrence. "I suppose nothing less will meet your new ideas of independence. If Mark is

willing to take charge of you, you can consider the affair settled as soon as you like."

"Mr. Guarda? Why should he?" and then she stopped, puzzled at being consigned to his care.

"Because he belongs to a theatre and has better opportunities for advancing you than anyone I know."

"And I never knew—you never told me!"

"No, I never did," he answered, calmly; "there was no object; neither did I mention Grayholme. I never gossip over family affairs. I was not sure you would ever meet either of them, and, after this soaring ambition took hold of you, I kept quiet about him for fear of raising false hopes."

"And you," she said, turning to Guarda, "you are willing to help me? to put me where I can learn and earn my own living at the same time? I will try very hard not to be a discredit to you."

"I believe you," he said, laying his hand on hers. "I will do what I can; but I warn you I will be cross. I will scold often. If you are sensible you will scold back. I have had to teach women who cried if I scolded. You must not do that, and we will be very ambitious, you and I, though we will quarrel," and his kindly pressure of her hand and earnestness of eyes told Merze she had found a friend.

And then they sat discussing plans for her. Lawrence did not enter into them except in one case, and that was regarding the name she should use, he insisting that she should not be known as a married woman.

"There are many worthy women in the profession who bear their husbands' names," remonstrated Merze.

"I don't dispute that," he replied; "but not young women, and not successful women, or else their success

has been won through other channels than dramatic ability. No—as to the rest I leave it to Mark and yourself; but about the name allow me to judge. You must not be known as a married woman."

"Then must I get a divorce?" she asked, trying to speak lightly, though she was embarrassed at this subject being touched on before Guarda, who, with all his kindliness, was yet a stranger to her. And she noticed he had no word to say in this discussion.

"No," answered Lawrence, "there is to be no divorce unless you wish it; we settled that before."

"I shall never wish it," she said, impulsively, with a half-remorseful feeling at not being able to care more for him, for usually he was most kind. "You are much better to me than I deserve, I think, and I promise to do as you say regarding my name."

"Then first you must promise never to let it be known that you are married."

"Never?"

"Never without my consent. I ask the promise for your own good. Some day you will thank me for it. A young girl will make a hit, when, if she were known to be any man's wife, she would scarcely be noticed. It will be an illusion easily kept up, as you are not likely to see me often. I leave for 'Frisco,' in a week."

"You are going away?"

"I certainly am. There is no object or duty to keep me now," he said, smiling into her serious face. "You will be left in good hands. But as to the name, that must be settled as I say. Either Merze Lawrence or Merze Mignot, without the 'Mrs.' And," he added, "you can use the latter now if you choose; there are no longer any grounds for that old fear of your father's

as to relations claiming you. You are no longer a child."

"There never were any grounds for that fear," she answered, "for I could never have gone to them or remained with them had they taken me. That will not influence my use of names. You and Mr. Guarda choose ; you will know which is best."

"Mignot is the best stage name by far," said Guarda, "it is an uncommon one, and looks well. As to Fred's idea about the marriage business, he is partially right, I am sorry to say. It is not the fault of the profession ; it is the fault of the public, and has too often proved a curse to those who cater to it. Yes, he is right in a way ; yet I don't see the necessity for such a promise of secrecy."

"But he does, or he would not ask it," answered Merze.

"I am afraid I have never done much to please him," and she glanced half-contritely toward Lawrence. "But I can do this and I will, and you will, I am sure, respect our wish for silence."

"Certainly, if you make a point of it," answered Guarda, "and I hope the future will justify your compact ; but I am much older than either of you, and have always found it best to fight shy of blind promises.'

CHAPTER XVI.

Ah, the golden days in the months that followed! Golden to Merze, despite the drudgery, for they were months of freedom, which meant to her happiness. She had begun to see the difficulties in the way to greatness, to fame, but it did not weaken her ambition. She played in the stock company of the Chatel, the theatre where Guarda was, and had been, stage manager for years. Every night she appeared in the modern society pieces, that gave her self-possession and knowledge of stage business, but to the classics, to the old masters of standard dramatic works, did the old man go for her deeper education. And he was her only teacher—a tireless one, to whom she gave love and reverence such as she had never given to any. Her own father had not been one to inspire such affection, and there had been no other, except that one man that one day.

She was not alone now, as she had been in her school days. There was no holding aloof among these frank, courteous people. She had come among them an amateur, with none who knew her, save the white-haired, whimsical, well-loved stage manager. He had spoken of her as a young friend of his, and they of Bohemia, knowing how seldom he gave that title to any, felt she was worthy, and without question, welcomed her to their circle—a magic one, that excludes all such trifles as affairs of state, or the war of nations. Under a monarchy or republic—it is all the same to them. Is there war in the South, or disease in the North, they spread

wings for safer climes, when and whither it matters not ; now plucking fruit or flowers on the golden slopes of California ; now laughing, jesting with old friends on the "Rialto" in their metropolis of the East.

So they pass, with heartiness of voice and warm clasp of hands, and smiles always, until the plodding workers of other trades, looking on, speak often of the easy carelessness of fruitless lives. Fruitless? When for numberless nights they bring a space of forgetfulness to the woes of thousands; when the morals given through their lips carry earnestness with a force that comes but seldom from a pulpit! Careless? Ah, yes, they laugh! And that laughter so often stamps them of heroic souls. They laugh though they drop dead in the harness ; they laugh on, though now and then the strain is too much, and the gates of a madhouse close on a life full of promise or of glorious fulfillment.

But if there are others to laugh instead, the public will soon forget the silent voice, and continue the repetition of old saws and sayings of past ages regarding these gay workers, forgetting that age and customs have changed.

Of the skeletons hidden under the tinsel, Merze had seen but little. The company at the Chatel was a very domestic one, very quiet and prosaic indeed, in comparison with the general highly-colored ideas of the ignorant in regard to such an assembly of workers—the ignorance that always condemns when it can not understand.

But she had at least learned one danger for those on whom the footlights shine as the white light that beats upon the throne—that fate ever decrees that each word, each action, is a thing claimed by the public, to be

discussed and passed from lip to lip, until a thoughtless word, a drop of dew, may drag down a deluge such as has drowned the reputation of many a blameless one.

Massa Mark—he had grown to be that to her since the first day under the firs at Greyholme—had tried as best he could to instill this knowledge in her mind without frightening her, or showing her the depths of the abyss along which she walked.

Ah, those happy days and nights, with the sense in them that hundreds listened to her voice, though her rôles were often unimportant! Guarda was himself of the old school, and would have no forced bloom in the life of this girl, who was as a flower to him.

"It is the only way, child, the only way," he would say, when the impetuous young blood grew impatient at the length of her probation. "How can you hope to do good work if you do not understand the rudiments of your profession?"

"Others succeed without such study," she said, unfolding a dramatic paper. "See! Here is Norine's name as a star, an attraction in herself, and her experience is no more than my own, not two seasons, yet someone has written a play for her. She is a success, yet what does she know of Shakespeare or Sheridan? Nothing. She is illiterate, without refinement. You, yourself, had her sent from the Chatel for some misconduct. Yet her name is here with all praise, and I—I study hard every day to understand the works that will always be unintelligible to her; yet who knows the name of Merze Mignot?"

The old man looked at her sadly. She had grown so very near to him, and, for all her marriage, she seemed to him still a child, and a child he honored for the bravery that had never once said "Pity me!" while he

could see there had been bitterness in her life that was not trifling, though there had been no confidences given him or required, and, without question, he had said : "I will be your friend."

Perhaps a knowledge of Fred's life had urged him to the offer when he had seen this girl with a width of desolation in her eyes, and no hope of content in her home; and she had turned thankfully, quickly toward the first friendly hand held toward her, so quickly that Guarda thought again of Lawrence. "He is a fool to rest in safety on her sense of duty. It may be strong, but there is also strength of gratitude in her. It is well, for her sake, that it is I who came first, and not a younger man."

He had petted and scolded her through two seasons, until a semblance of the old childish impetuosity came to her at times in her intercourse with him, as it did this day, when the record of Norine's success made her own work appear worthless.

"Ah, Merze," he said, chidingly, "you are still but a child. You know more than Norine. Yes, thank God, in all things that are best. But she has the knowledge of her world and age such as I hope you will never gain through the same channels, and you lament that the public know her best! That is paltry. I care more than to want such fame for any pupil of mine. When they know you, I do not intend they shall forget you. And who remembers Norine when the curtain falls? Not one who has received benefit from her work in any artistic sense. Art, in its higher attributes, will always be a thing unintelligible to her, an empty name—nothing, and of no use in her work so long as she can grimace and dance very badly, but in a catchy way that suits the gallery. Act? Bah! She can shout through five acts

of a border drama if there are enough tableaux and red fire to help her through. Surely *you* do not want success such as that?"

His words of sarcastic ridicule brought a half-feeling of shame to her, remembering, as she did, his unceasing kindness.

"Forgive me, Massa Mark!" she said, contritely enough. "You are right always, I know; only sometimes it seems long to wait; but forgive me."

"Forgive?" he said, looking at her fondly, a little sadly. "Certainly, child. There is little to forgive; but if there were, age learns the necessity of it."

He could see so plainly her rebellion at the service in the ranks, while all the swift-coursing blood of youth throbbed with longing for leadership. He could appreciate it himself, for once his own pulse had beaten as quickly with the same hope, but it was long, very long ago. Some great change of sorrow had come into his life years before. What, none knew, for he was always silent as to his own affairs; but it had whitened his hair and silenced the voice that had never been heard above the footlights since.

Managing the stage contented him now, or, if it did not content, none was ever the wiser. A man who knew everyone's record, but of whom little was known outside of business transactions. How long since he had drifted into New York and settled there, none could tell, or cared to count back through the years. His face was one of the old landmarks that the players were always sure of meeting when they came trooping in at the end of the season. And a welcome one it often was to the poor fellows who had been "playing in hard luck" out through nameless States.

His words were often curt, his sharp eyes were sure to see every faulty movement during a rehearsal, and there alone could he be likened to the "Mephisto" of his whimsical fancy—not an isolated case, as most stage managers can affirm; it is a rôle thrust on them so often in the thoughts of those they would teach. It is doubtful if the volunteer who has acquitted himself well in his first battle can ever again see the necessity of drills.

He occupied rooms in which he had lived for years, and the walls were covered with the pictured faces of an age he had seen die out, the faces among which his youth had been lived; and his eyes, gazing at them, would tempt his memory until it would wander back through the years that comprehended the greater part of the history of the drama in America. A very much littered room it was, with its multitudes of manuscripts and old engravings of theatrical scenes and people; many of them stars that had burned out, and in whose stead his old eyes could see only will-o'-the-wisps.

For Merze he had secured a home in a private family, where two pleasantly-situated rooms were furnished tastefully but inexpensively. She would incur no expense that she could not see her way clear to repay; and although Guarda tried to force many little luxuries on her, he admired the will that would not allow itself to be persuaded, while he knew she had all a beautiful woman's longing for beautiful things.

Of Lawrence they heard but seldom, and not very favorably. Evidently Dame Fortune did not lavish on him the smiles as of yore. He had written asking Guarda to buy out his share of Greyholme, as he needed the money. The old man, through years of steady

labor, had amassed quite a considerable amount of money, and was quite able and rather glad to do it.

"I would not want it to go into the hands of strangers," he said to Merze, when they discussed the question. "Jupe and Rhoda must be taken care of; and who knows, some time it may be a welcome retreat for us in our old days, my dear. Yes, my child, we must begin to look ahead. I will buy it."

His decision was gratifying to Merze. During her short stay she had become much attached to the quaint old place, with its dusky grandeur of a past age. She liked to think of it as a home to which she might return, but felt she could not do so in content while it belonged in part to her husband, though she tried always to have only kind thoughts of him, and had offered him her little all that had been saved from her salary, an offer which he refused.

The two seasons had passed quickly, despite the work, which was trying sometimes. There were the libraries, the art galleries, the many things to be seen in a great city for the asking, and with her was always to be seen the white-haired old man with the shambling gait and odd, foreign face. A tireless companion he was, with the history of the old town at his finger ends, and Merze never tired of the reminiscences which came at times from his lips, tinged with the poetry of speech scarcely native to others than those whose veins have been filled from sun-kissed lanes—and his had been.

Bit by bit he had told scraps of his own history, until she knew that his mother had been a Spanish dancer—a beautiful woman of fire and motion, who had drifted across the seas, and, after a short season of triumph in old New York, had disappeared from the public. Love had

proven stronger than art, and she became the wife of a young Virginia planter, a Lawrence, and her sunny land was lost to her forever. Not a very happy exchange did America give her. Mere tolerance was all that her husband's family granted to the young bride. Her calling did not please them, neither did her religion ; but the controversy did not last long. The climate—a tonic to so many—was death to the beautiful, unwelcome guest. She left as a legacy to the world her boy, Mark. The husband wandered off to South America, and never came back, and the son—with the instincts of his mother in him—chose the stage, and, in a fit of anger at opposition, had discarded the name of his father's people, and claimed only his mother's. A soldier of fortune he had been ever since, asking nothing of his kindred, but helping them much since his days of maturity, now long past. The family were all gone save himself and his cousin, and few knew that the stylish, jaunty, nonchalant gambler was at all connected with the whimsical, kindly stage manager of the Chalet. He had been alone for so many years until this girl had come, as a blessing, he said often, and it gave him something to care for—to love—the destiny of humanity.

Of course, back in the past there had been loves. What life has them not? It is the only music for youth to keep step to, and what a mad dance it leads those who blindly follow! Ah! yes, there had been loves, but no wife, no children, and this girl was to him what such love would have been if it had come into his life!

"Massa Mark," she said, one day, caressingly, smoothing back the white hair, "Massa Mark, why are you so good to me? You were so from the first. I often wonder at my good fortune."

"Ah, my Merze, you wonder at that. Everyone, even a Mephisto, must have something to love."

"You say that so often, Massa Mark."

"Because I have lived long and seen many lives. All have the same need."

"But mine——"

"Yes, yes," he interrupted, "I know what you would say—that there has been no love come to you as yet, and you are twenty. What a multitude of years! And there is no one, eh?—no one—but a white-haired old man for whom you have cared at all? and that—ah, for the young such love does not content, though the old are grateful for even so much. But there is an ideal then. There is always that, if nothing more substantial. Well, make your ideal so high that mankind can not climb to it; then, if you are true to it, you will save your life the fret, the heart-burning, the madness of the sweet song that lulls to a sleep from which you waken tired, disillusioned, seeing, with cleared vision, the clay feet of your god—the clay feet so many walk beside all the days of their life—knowing that every heavy step tramples deeper some sweet, vague ambition of ideal growth. And why? Ah! child, for the sake of days when the clay was golden in the eyes of love!"

A silence fell over the two when he finished speaking. So, often, some careless word of hers would touch a chord in the old half-Spanish heart that would bring out swift, burning words with the grace, the rythm of the *improvisators* of his ancestors—words sounding strange to the ears of many, laughed at by the careless about the theatres, until a half mask of curtness had gradually slipped over it. It was not the language of work-a-day life; but it explained, in a way, to Merze the position

he held, though his knowledge exceeded that of more successful workers around him.

It is not genius alone that rises. It is too fine, too delicate, unless mixed with the baser metals, and this gold, in its golden days, had not alloy enough to pass current.

Merze felt this dimly, tenderly, and it tinged all her manner toward him with a daughter's fondness. She leaned over to him, touching his hand lovingly.

"Ah! Massa Mark," she said, smiling, "how fatal you make this blind god's kiss. Is it not ungrateful? I will wager it has not always been unkind to you. But you have not once answered my question why you cared for me from the first."

"Why? Ah, curiosity! Well, perhaps because of some dead-and-gone bit of sentimentality—a remembrance of eyes that yours resemble. We will pretend that it is so, you and I. That will be a romance of our own; no other will know. There will be a woman in this story of ours—a woman dead long ago—fair and stately, with eyes like yours; not altogether happy eyes, my Merze. And when I am old and white-haired, I see again a face like hers—like her daughter's might have been, had she borne one. It is a friendless face, and it looks at me with the eyes of old days. Well, what am I to do? The girl, she is nothing. Bah, no! An ignoramus. But I take her, I scold her, I make her find fault with me a dozen times a day. I drill her in ways she thinks senseless; but she is climbing up—up in knowledge, and some day her chance will come. It comes to all some day, if they only know enough not to let it pass. And then—then what will we see? The cocoon that served its purpose well in obscurity? No, no! That

will be left behind forever, and the world will see the brilliant thing it has covered. Oh, yes! You shake your head; but you will see I am of the prophets! And then, when this is all accomplished, you and I will know it is all because you had eyes like the dead woman that an old man scolded you into being great. Well, how do you like my romance?"

"But the chance, Massa Mark? It is very long in coming!"

"Patience, my child—patience, and shuffle the cards."

CHAPTER XVII.

But at last the chance did come—the chance to do some work that would place her in a groove above that she had occupied. Several times she had understudied the leading lady's rôles, and once, in a case of illness, had even run through a rehearsal under direction of the author, who expressed surprise to Guarda at the girl's aptitude and delicate conception of the part.

"Only one rehearsal, and how naturally she drops into the situations," he said, lowly, to the old man. "But a little over a year's experience, you say? Well, a woman like that will not remain long in the background. She is clever, wonderfully clever; and the youth, and the grace, and all that wealth of bronze hair! You need not go begging for a leading lady should Mathilde Hargate leave the position unfilled."

And though Merze did not play the part, there were many of the company who spoke regretfully of it. She could not help hearing their words, and it gave her fresh encouragement.

This was some weeks before the holidays. The piece was a success, and was to be kept on until another production by the same author, Mr. Orlane, was ready, which was expected to be about Easter. He was poet, as well as playwright, and the commonplaces of his work in modern comedy and drama did not content him, though they brought him reputation and an enviable income. But the beauty of verse, in its measured beats, kept the echoes of rythm in his brain until, despite friendly warnings, he had essayed that most risky of ventures in America, a classical drama by an American, a romance of that dead people, the Druids. The characters were strongly drawn, dramatic life thrilled through the musical verse, and the costumes, in their picturesque simplicity, were designed by an artist whose name is honored as one of the foremost of modern workmen. It was a labor of love, else he would not have spared from his own canvas the time precious to his art.

"I can not recommend anyone to you, Orlane," he said, when spoken to of it; "but I will do it myself."

"I should never have thought of asking it," said Orlane, delightedly. "It would be a great lift toward success for it; but I have never known you to lend your art to theatrical work."

"Neither have I," replied North; but this thing would appeal to any artist's fancies. What opportunities for picturesque groupings in that banquet scene! And the sacrifice at the temple, and the accusation of *Hesta!* It is a sort of intoxication to embellish such a poetical conception. No one shall do it but myself. How is it to be cast as to women? So much in the draperies depends on the women who have to wear them."

"Well," said Orlane, reflectively, "it is not altogether

decided. There will be the Chalet stock company, with the addition of choruses, and a few extra people for principals. For *Ogartha*, the leading heavy, there is Mathilde Hargate; for *Isolde* and *Hena* there are Miss Alwayne and Mrs. Cooper. Those are the only ones of importance, except *Hesta*, the title rôle, and that we are at sea about. Miss Hargate was not pleased because it was not given to her."

"What! that girlish creation of grace and dignity! Mathilde is plumply handsome, and a fine actress. *Ogartha*, with its fire and strength, will just fit her. But the other! I fear, Orlane, it will be the one weak spot in the piece. To read it, the character is beautiful, the conception of a poet; but how seldom you see those poetical conceptions brought to life through the lips of another. It is a thing to read alone, not to risk being marred. At this moment I do not know of one who would be my ideal of the part."

"Nor I," answered Orlane, "with but one exception, and she is so in looks, voice, and manner. I have asked that she be left out of the cast in case of an emergency, and yet——"

"Well, what's the matter?"

"She is not well enough known. I should like to have a woman with more of a reputation for the title rôle. You will know the one I mean; she does clever work, Merze Mignot."

"Yes, I do. You are right; she is one's ideal of such a part. Have her try it, by all means. She will do it creditably, at least, and I should not wonder if she made a success of it. She is rather on the statuesque order. Just the thing! And her face! I assure you it will be a pleasure to design costumes for her."

And with this encouragement toward what he wholly desired, yet half feared, he spoke to Guarda.

"She will do it," he said, briefly, and took home to her the play.

"Read it, read it all," he said. "It is, I think, the dearest ambition of this man's life. All his successes will not make amends, in his eyes, for the failure of this, if it does fail. Read it."

She did so, earnestly, not knowing the reason, but charmed with the beauty of it.

"It is grand, Massa Mark," she said, closing it. "But it is too fine, too delicate, too deep for the masses. Only scholars will care for it."

"You are right, I fear. It will gradually creep into men's libraries, but it will not be long seen on the stage of theatres. We will make it a success; but the mounting, the dressing, the pictures, and music will be needed to make it so. It is a pity there is not more rugged strength, in the stead of all that delicate beauty of language."

"And I am out of the bill. That seems strange. You always keep me so busy. How does it come?"

"Ah, that was a little mistake! You are to play after all."

"And what—which part?" she asked, eagerly.

"Which would you prefer?"

"Massa Mark, don't be Mephisto to me. You know I have not yet the position from which I can make choice of parts."

"Perhaps this will help you to such a position, for you play *Hesta*."

"Massa Mark!"

That was all. But the gladness, the incredulity in the

voice, showed the depth of longing that yet feared to grasp its prize. She had hoped before.

"Yes, it is true," he said, glad as herself. "But don't look like that, as if you were frightened. Is the thought so terrible?"

"No, not that," she answered, smiling, though nervous; "but just at first, for one moment, I grew dizzy —with gladness, I think. And it is true, Massa Mark, quite true? And that beautiful *Hesta!* And they think—you think I can do it?"

"I had not accepted for you otherwise. It is for such as this I have had you work quietly, out of sight, that when your chance came you would be equal to it."

"And it has come, Massa Mark, it has come at last?"

"It has come. God grant it bring blessings to you."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Very nervous was the white-robed *Hesta* on that opening night, but very quiet. Mark and Orlane looked at her critically as she left the dressing-room, and each showed by his face that her appearance, at least, was all they could wish. The curtain had just gone up on the second act. The first had been enthusiastically received, but Orlane, coming back from the door, said there was much expectancy regarding the *Hesta*. North had announced his wish to paint a picture of her in the part, and the report had spread rapidly in artistic circles. All remembered the girl with the strange name and the beautiful Greek face, now that a noted author had found in it his ideal for a poetical character. All were anxious to

see her, now that some one of importance had taken her up. So it is always ; the hounds and their leader over again.

The banquet scene was on. A young priestess—enchantress, was to be dedicated to the heathen temple. About were grouped the people, in moving pictures pleasing to the eye, though no words were spoken, save the chorus of children's voices, heard in the distance, then nearer, nearer, ushering in the young soul whose hand was, in future, to shed the blood for the highest of their sacrifices.

She stood in the upper entrance ; close to her, Guarda and Orlane. The old man took her hand in his. It was cold as ice. "Be brave, my child," he whispered. "You will succeed if you are only that."

"I am trying hard to be so, Massa Mark," she answered, endeavoring to smile, for all her nervousness. "But things will persist in swimming around a little before my eyes. I can scarcely tell the color of my own dress."

"The audience will have no trouble in distinguishing it," replied Orlane. "You will look like a snow-drop among all that mass of color !"

A snow-drop !

Back flashed her memory to the one who bade her take them as an emblem for her life. Always she had remembered, but his tones came to her afresh across the years as she stood there. The childish chorus was reaching its finish; they were making their entrance, scattering flowers for the path of the young devotee.

Still she stood. A snow-drop ! The memory should lend inspiration for this work that surely was fitting for his words, his hopes for her. Orlane touched her arm, anxiously.

"It is you ; the music is ceasing. Go !"

Another moment and she stood before them, under the graven arch of the ruined temple. The full moon, rising through the trees, enveloped her with its glamor of blue mist until she looked a marble thing, a creature perfect as a star, standing there in the virginal robes, that clung to the rounded form and fell in white folds to the bare, sandaled feet, that shone like pink wax on the dark tiles.

One instant a hush fell over the house, the next, earnest applause was her reception—the first sweet sip of adulation. She did not acknowledge it by look or gesture. Her eyes were on the audience, but the gaze was as one deaf to the things close around, hearing only voices akin to those Joan listened to among the pastures. The others separated, giving space to the seemingly enchanted figure that moved with fateful, unseeing eyes through their midst.

One instant the arms were raised and hands clasped over the eyes, as if to shut out insistent visions, then the voice, clear and low as an Æolian harp, with its sad undertone, went out to the listening audience :

> Of blood they whisper, till it drips and drowns,
> Through all the days of dread that are to come,
> Through honors given, great, though terrible,
> And rites held sacred that do hem around
> The soul a-sick for youth's fair dynasty.

Her tones thrilled the hearers, who wondered if this peerless creature could be the one they had ever noticed, carelessly, as a handsome girl, with a fine voice and magnificent hair. She was a thing of the ocean, whose life had been cramped into narrow channels, until a chance current had borne her on its bosom out into the

boundless reaches of her own element. Her success was unequivocal.

Some gentlemen in an upper box were very demonstrative in their applause, so much so that it was an annoyance. *Hesta*, waiting for it to cease, raised her eyes in mute reproof toward them. But her gaze did not reach to their height. Another pair of eyes arrested her own. Dark, questioning, annoyed, they looked into hers, and for one moment, the stage, the people, all disappeared before her; only those deep, never-to-be-forgotten eyes were visible! Then Guarda prompted her. The dialogue was continued, and when she found courage to glance that way again the eyes were gone.

The eyes belonged to a dark, tall man, in a traveling coat and cap, who had entered only to exchange words with the artist, North, who was one of a party of friends, who had come fearfully to see this visionary venture of Orlane.

The stranger had hurriedly exchanged a few words, and was turning to leave, when his eyes fell on the stage, with its beauty of setting and costuming, the mass of purple, crimson, and dark stuffs making an ever-changing background for that picture of the woman in clinging white robes, and then she raised her eyes until they met his, and stood still, wordless for an instant, and, as she continued her speech, he turned to his friend and said :

"Let me see a programme. Who is that woman in white?"

"There is her name, Merze Mignot," answered North, handing him a play-bill.

"Merze Mignot?" A name tells little. Who, what is she?"

"Who is she? Ah, that is the question!" chimed in

one of the party. "But she is a very clever actress, who has played here two seasons in obscurity, and now, in a twinkling, makes one long stride for first favors, and wins them, too. Listen to that! She has caught on with a vengeance."

"And what a picture she is with all that tawny bronze hair loose. Like a young lioness in that accusation scene!"

"And what a voice!"

"And what a foot!"

The stranger turned sharply, as if to speak, at the last remark, but, instead, he only said to North:

"Well, good-by, old fellow. No, I can't stay over. Only stopped for a word with you. Explain to Guarda my haste, that I was only passing through, and that I leave to-night for Mexico. Let me hear from you sometimes. Good-by."

The play went on to the close a success. The people dispersed, speaking of it as an artistic triumph, often with their praise coupling the name of Merze Mignot. In one night she had secured a footing that placed her above all doubt as to ability. The author thanked her, all congratulated her, and Guarda was unending in delightful praise. But she turned from them all, tired, pale from exertion and sympathy with the beautiful character entrusted to her care. Only to Orlane she said:

"In the third act there was a tall, dark, gentleman in the box with Mr. North. I think he left after that. Will you ask his name for me? His face looks familiar." And then to Guarda: "Take me home, Massa Mark, I am tired, so tired."

And in her heart was one thought that drowned all praise from the rest. "It was his face, his face once

more ; but it looked annoyed, displeased. Surely the work is good ; they all say so, only his eyes did not look glad."

It was the only drop of bitterness amidst the sweets of her success. If only his eyes had smiled ! Verily, she, the priestess inviolate of the tragedy, was but woman after all.

In the morning a note came to her from Orlane.

"The gentleman is Edward M. Drande, a journalist, just returned from Scotland, and on his way through to Mexico as correspondent from there to a New York paper."

That was all, but it was enough to assure her it was no imagination on her part. He had been there, and a journalist, a writer ; that is what she would have thought him. But why did his eyes look angered ?

And on a train leaving the city on the opening night of "Hesta" sat a man with cap pulled low over his eyes, his face moody, contemptuous, tired.

"So this is how she is ending. I had thought of her as somewhere in the peace of a homely, girlish life, with at least a remnant of memory for that purity of life I tried to instill. Ah, it is, after all, the longing for greatness that has drowned all else ; it drowns all it touches ! I had thought of her as a child cared for by friends, and I find her with feet and bosom bared to the gaze of all who can pay for the right to look."

CHAPTER XIX.

It was an artistic success, a thorough one, but the one of whom most mention was made was the new genius that had flashed into existence among them. At the close of the season many flattering offers were made her, all of which she submitted to Guarda's judgment.

"I will never quarrel with it again," she said, lovingly. "But for it I never should have succeeded."

From Lawrence they had received letters at intervals. One of congratulation came to her when he heard of her success, but none of his letters were very bright as to his own affairs; several hinted at a possible return East, and, finally, Guarda came to her one day with a letter in his hand and not a very happy expression on his face.

"Fred is coming back," he said, abruptly, seating himself, and beating a tattoo with his walking-stick on the floor.

"Coming back?" Merze felt that Guarda was not pleased, and she could not truthfully say that she herself was. Yet he had been so considerate—more than most men would have been. Her knowledge of the world had taught her that. And, after all, why should he not come back? She could not expect him to exile himself forever because of her.

"Well, you expected him to come some time." Her tone was equivocal; she was not pleased, yet could realize the injustice of displeasure.

"Certainly; but I hoped his judgment would tell

him that it were best for both that he kept away from you."

She looked questioningly at him. "He has done so, and I think he always will."

"Don't be too sure of that. Read the finish of that letter."

She did so. "If Merze accept any engagement that will take her out of New York have her send me her address when I go East. I wish especially to see her."

"Well," she said, handing it back, "I see nothing to disturb ourselves about in this, Massa Mark. It may be some business for which it is necessary to see me. Do not be alarmed. He cares for me too little to annoy me by his presence."

"Perhaps," he answered, laconically; "but I know Fred and the rest of mankind well enough to know there is a temptation in claiming a wife who has made of herself what you have."

"Nonsense!" And she laughed a little uncertainly. "Don't be gloomy, but tell me what you have done about the choice of engagements. Do I remain at the Chalet? What a lot of business troubles I have brought you!"

But, despite her light tone, her thoughts over the letter and his words were deeper than she would let him see.

"Claim her!" Surely he would never do that, she thought. Surely Massa Mark must be wrong. If it were for the money he could have it all, all she might make, if she could only keep her freedom.

Two weeks later he came, not nearly so *débonnaire* as when Merze saw him first. Bad luck had been gaining

on him of late, as it gains on them all in time. His eyes were not so clear, his jaunty manner not so assured. Merze, noting the change, felt, in a way, sorry, though at the same time thinking: "He was kind and helpful to me when he could be so; now I may be able to make some return."

"Yes," he said, in answer to a question of Guarda's; "yes, I ran away from bad luck out there in 'Frisco, and, fearing it might get worse, came back to settle up my affairs, make my will, etc."

But he did not say it very jovially, and, at the door, spoke a few significant words in parting.

"To-morrow, at two, I should like to see you alone, if convenient."

Merze unhesitatingly gave consent to his coming. She owed him too much to refuse. But she wondered at the request. Could Guarda, after all, be right? Her sleep was not a sound one that night.

He came promptly, and she could see by his face, that whatever the matter to be discussed, it was one of deep interest to him. She felt herself, trembling with a sickening sort of dread lest it should be of herself they were to speak, and, if so, she could think of nothing but Guarda's surmises. Anything, anything would be preferable to that. He did not keep her long in suspense.

"Merze," he began, "you have always seemed to me a pretty sensible girl, more so than most girls. There has never been any nonsense about love between us, so I know you have no feelings on that score to be hurt by what I am going to tell you."

"No," she answered, as quietly as she could. His tone told her Guarda's suspicions were wrong, surely

wrong, and hope after fear did not leave her voice very steady. "No ; go on. What is it ?"

"Have you ever wondered who the man was that was shot that night in the Kentucky Hills ?"

Her face paled as she thought of that night's incidents. It had always been a dead letter between them.

"Yes," she answered ; "but I thought if you ever cared to tell me you would do so without asking."

"Sensible but rare trait in womanhood ! Well, that is what I intend to tell you of to-day. I am going down hill fast. I never had such infernal luck before. Nothing seems likely to check it. We have our own superstitions about such things, and I've my own, perhaps. Anyway, I want to try and straighten things in case I should go under ; not for my own sake, but for a girl who would be left alone."

"A girl—a relative ?" Merze was puzzled. She had never heard either Guarda or himself speak of any

"No, not a relative," he answered. "But I will tell you the story, then do as you please. Sixteen years ago there was a wife who lived more unhappily even than you lived for those few weeks of your life ; for hers was of longer duration, and out of her repugnance to the man she had married grew a love for some one else, who was kind, and seemed to understand her. Well, they were both young—it is not a good story to tell. The memory of it was what made me see clearly that you also would never be contented, and I did not want your life to end like hers ; neither did I want to leave you entirely alone. It is not good for a woman, if young. As to the story : There was finally an elopement. A few months afterward a child was born, a daughter. For some time they remained abroad, but never long in one

locality. The husband followed them from place to place. She was happy, however, despite that, for a time. A bright butterfly of a woman she was; not like you, my cold Merze. At last the dread began to wear on her, and as the child grew she began to think of its future, of the disgrace, and all the rest that people so seldom remember in time. She had thought only of her own unhappiness when she fled, and, too late, the child came to reproach her. Well, she was not strong-minded, and those remorseful thoughts, added to her fear of him, filled her mind until there was room for nothing else. She became morbid almost to insanity, and the doctors advised a return to her own country. They came back, but it was all of no use. The child had to be taken from her, and, at last, four years after the elopement, she was taken to a madhouse, and has never been out of it since."

He ceased speaking for a moment. If he expected any comment, none was given. Merze sat silent, her chin on her hand, looking at him, and he continued:

"The child was placed in a convent of her mother's faith, as she had often requested should be done if anything happened to her. She never wanted the husband or her people to know of its existence, for, in the face of her own action, she knew they would not have accepted it as legitimate, though in that they would have been wrong, for her husband was its father. She has remained in the convent ever since. More than likely she will remain in the sisterhood, but she is to be given one year out of it, in order to judge for herself. That, also, was a request of her mother. During that year she must be found a home somewhere in a family, but her guardian does not know any woman friend to whom

he can go for help concerning her. Are you interested in the story?"

"Very much," replied Merze, briefly. "Go on."

"There is little left to tell. That man in Kentucky was the girl's father. It is needless to say she does not know how he died. I am the man he followed. That is all."

"I guessed as much," she said slowly, her thoughts full of memories that confirmed his story, and full of thankfulness that her own freedom was not to be touched. "I guessed as much. What do you want me to do?"

"What are you willing to do?" he asked, looking at her curiously. She seemed to him glad in some way, as if anxious to help. He did not know how welcome this story was, in contrast to what she had half feared.

"Everything possible," she said, in answer to his question.

"Knowing all?"

"Knowing all. What difference does that make? It does not lesson my debt to you for the care and education I received when, no doubt, it was often difficult for you with all that other expense. I am glad you told me it all," she said, gratefully. "It makes me think better of you in many ways. I feel I have judged you wrongly at times. Do others know?"

"Only Guarda knows about the child. It was from Greyholm we—it was while on a visit there she left her husband. I have shunned the place ever since."

"Does Massa Mark know you are speaking to me of it?" she asked after a little.

"Yes," he answered, moodily, "and he is not well pleased. He thinks I am trying to lay too many cares

on your shoulders; but I only want some woman for her to live with for the one year, or one to have a sort of care over her. I can't do it. I have only seen her at long intervals, and am a stranger to her. I thought you might know of some one who would board her, and if she does not want to return to the convent she must learn in some way to make her own living. I thought I could provide better for her, and would have, if luck hadn't taken such a turn on me lately. She is very pretty, and, if she cared for the life, might do well on the stage. You could judge best of that. She is getting to that age when it is difficult for me to do anything for her outside of the convent without awkward questions. I can't marry *her* to get rid of her."

"No," assented Merze; "but I'll tell you what you can do with her—give her to me."

"*Give* her to you?"

"Yes. So far as taking care of her is concerned. I have only myself to provide for, and I am earning more money than I spend. I never had a near girl or woman friend in my life; perhaps we might care for each other. Anyway, you should let me help you in this, and try in part to repay your care of me when I was her age."

CHAPTER XX.

"There must be no thought of the stage for her. She never could stand it, and she looks too much a young saint ever to put her into the world's whirlpool. She is of the sort that must be cared for with gentleness all the days of their lives."

It was Merze who spoke so in leaving the convent,

where a pair of childish blue eyes had looked at her in wistful wonder and admiration when she claimed the right to return in a week and take her for one year away from books and the routine of convent life.

"And you like her?" asked Lawrence, looking at her questioningly.

"Like her! Who could help it? She is a little white violet of a girl, with all the serious beauty of an Elaine, the purity of a Godiva."

"You are a curious woman, Merze," he said, after a little silence, as they drove down the shaded road to the station nearest the convent. "Do you know there is not one woman in a hundred would do what you are doing?"

"Perhaps not. I hope there is not one in a thousand who has had such a life as mine," she replied, bitterly.

"Yes; it has not always been pleasant," assented Lawrence, easily; but it has turned out for you all right at last. You can not complain now."

She did not answer. Of what use would it be to speak the thoughts brought into her mind by the pure eyes of the child-woman she had left—the eyes ever sheltered from evil sights or knowledge by the convent walls, the eyes she felt were taught some faith that gave them higher hopes than her own had ever known—her own, that halted at the limits of this world, blinded and uncertain, longing, yet questioning? And within the white face enveloping the life just left she felt dimly a something that had never touched her own childhood, the peace conferred by the kiss of God.

She was rebellious at fate's unkindness in taking from her the things needed to form young lives for perfect work. She had studied, gone so deep into things theo-

logical that the confusion of faiths and creeds was an inextricable mass, out of which she had walked with empty hands. She had no guide but that of curiosity, and it, she felt, had failed her. Something there was she had missed; what, she could scarcely define, but she felt that this child held it without effort in her little hands—this child, of whom she was to take charge. And, for the first time, the thought came into her heart, "Am I fit?"

And her life, for all its success, seemed empty.

Lawrence had given her entire charge of the girl, had given her all papers in his possession connected with herself and her mother, receipted bills, and such things, that had been accumulating for years.

"No knowing where I may bring up," he had said, in handing them to her. 'They are all together there; I brought them just as they were; keep them for me."

The night of her return from the convent Merze sat long talking to Guarda.

"She is a young saint," she repeated, "and would be bewildered and lost in our world. He was foolish to think of the stage for her."

"Because she is too good?" he questioned, ironically. The idea of this girl was an annoyance to him.

"No, Massa Mark, not that. I think none can be too good for our work. It requires more goodness than other professions, for its temptations are greater. But it requires a knowledge of things worldly that would only disturb the illusions of a girl like that. Let her keep them while she can. I envy her their possession, but I shall help her to guard them."

"And pray what do you intend to do with her if the stage is not to gain her?"

"I scarcely know," she replied. The question was

one she had not yet answered for herself. "I had thought to have her live with me here, but that was before I had seen her. Some quiet place in the country would suit her best. In the summers we can be together; but not while I play, not, at least, until she sees more of the world."

"Summers!" he ejaculated. "My dear Merze, you are an enthusiast on this question. You seem to think you are sure to pass scores of summers together, yet you have not known her one day. You say she is pretty. Then the chances are that two summers will see her married."

"Don't!" she said, throwing out her hand, "don't prophesy such things. She is too good for that."

"Ah, my Merze," he said, kindly, taking the hand in his, "do not think so much over a thing that is past, that you can not help. Are you never to forget?"

"Would you care any more for me if I were one who could forget easier?" she returned. "No, I am sure you would not, Massa Mark. But of Crista. It is a pretty name, don't you think so? Crista Loring; it seems to suit her so well. Looking at her, one could not imagine her having any kinship with such a mother. Do you remember that little village in Delaware, on the bay, where you sent me last summer when I was tired out from the winter's work? That would surely be a good place to send her. I stopped with the widow of a physician while there—very pleasant people, and the daughters are near her age. They would be good companions for her. She could see a little of world-life there in a quiet way, and the place will be sure to please her, it is so lovely. Just now it is the best I can think of. How do you like my idea?"

"As well as any other, since you have made up your mind to take such an annoyance on your hands," he answered, grumblingly. "From the first, I have opposed it. Let Fred himself bear the weight of his own follies. He is changing much from what he was, else he would never have come to you about it."

"Changing! How?"

"For the worse, decidedly. He accepts your generosity in this affair as a thing of course. It may be bad luck that makes him weaker, and it may be dissipation. He never used to drink; now, I am not so sure. It would be better for all if he kept away entirely."

"Don't you think, Massa Mark," she said, hesitatingly, "that it would be better if we could help him to something creditable to do?"

Guarda turned on her sharply.

"So he has been speaking to you?"

"Yes," she answered, in the tone of one acknowledging a thing against her will.

The old man jumped up angrily, and shambled over to the window.

"I expected it. What did I tell you?" he demanded. She made him no answer. Directly he turned and came back, standing looking at her, with varying emotions in his whimsical old face.

"Well, we have him with us, do we? That is well for Mephisto's tastes. I see the road open for plenty of misery to come. Just in my line; go ahead."

"I only said I would think of it," she said, in answer to his sarcasm.

"Which is equal to saying yes, and so he will take it."

"Now, don't be angry, Mephisto," she said, reaching

out her hand and taking his. He sat down again beside her ; but his face was very gloomy.

"I am not angry, Merze ; but however clever you are in your profession, in some other things you are a fool. You have some very exaggerated ideas of gratitude toward him that, if persisted in, will cause you trouble."

"Massa Mark, I have great reason to be grateful," she answered, earnestly, "more than you are aware of, I think. He gave me what education I have ; I was his wife, yet he let me go free at my own request."

"Yes," assented the old man, curtly, "and bound you by a nonsensical promise that may also cause you annoyance if you consider it binding."

"I have made no promises—I do not consider so," she said, more coldly than any words had ever been spoken between them.

"Look here, my child," shaking his finger chidingly at her, "there must be no anger over this ; the subject is not worth it. If you cared for each other I would not say one word, but you do not ; so why hold yourself bound in any way to such a life ; he has thrown away his chances right and left for years. The fault is his own that he is empty-handed now."

"Perhaps," she assented. "I do not defend him; only he was dada's friend ; he has been mine, and I should do what I can in return. And, after all, Massa Mark, there is one thing to be commended in him—his loyalty to that child left in his charge and his truth to that one woman."

"Ah," and he smiled sarcastically, "that is what touches you, my romance-loving Merze! I wondered why all this sympathy."

"He did not try to win sympathy in telling me the story. It was told simply as a matter of business; but his manner did not hide from me the deep love he must have had for her, and I respect him for his truth to it. It showed me clearly, more so than ever, that I need never fear any claims of his."

"And he spoke to you of the business management?"

"Yes; he heard they wanted a new man at the Chalet, and asked if I would object to him taking the position if he could get it. He has done such work before, he says, so what am I to do? Tell him, after all his kindness to me, that I dislike him so much I could not endure him in the same theatre? That would surely be a poor return. And it does not matter so much; our work need not interfere with each other. I will not have him think me ungrateful, and—I will not object."

The last, though spoken kindly, was very decided, and Guarda saw she meant it.

"Well, I shall say no more," he answered, seeing that the case was hopeless against what he deemed her quixotic ideas; "only if harm come of it I can sit in the corner and chuckle, saying: 'I told you so.'"

"Massa Mark," she said, after a little while, "I have been poor, very poor, often. I have seen dada discouraged, just as Lawrence is now, over a streak of bad luck, only dada's streaks, toward the last, had no ending. But I have seen him so tired, so discouraged, that I think if anyone had given him a chance of something better it might have changed him into a different man. Well, I have been thinking about it to-day. Lawrence seems tired of his profession, and anxious to get at something that will 'change his luck,' as he says. And,

perhaps, if he were encouraged in it he might never return to the old work."

"Perhaps," said Guarda sarcastically ; "but there is a true saying about teaching old dogs new tricks. Fred is not a young one by any means."

"I know ; but I—I feel—I have always felt, in a way, ashamed that I could give nothing but gratitude for his kindness, and now, if I see any way in which I could help him to a more honest life, I think it would be only my duty to put my own feelings aside and do it."

"Ah, Merze, Merze !" he said, kindly, wistfully, "have you so little to fill your life that you must conjure up such imaginary duties and deem them sacred? An artist should have no care but Art."

"And I," she answered, "have nothing that will detract from my work. I have only the girl Crista, and you, Massa Mark—you always. As to him, if he cares to make an honest living, I only ask that he be encouraged in it, and you yourself have never disliked him."

"No, not entirely. Like everyone, he has some redeeming points. But I dislike to see you placed in such a position, surely the strangest a woman ever had to fill, and I feel that the end is not yet."

CHAPTER XXI.

Merze went alone to the convent for Crista, and was met with shy, glad eyes in the stately, sunny reception room.

"I was watching for you from the window until Sister Paul told me I must not be impatient, and I am so glad you have come at last," she said, frankly, extending both

hands to this lady who was so unlike those about her—so young, yet so self-possessed, and apparently so much of the world in her manner.

"You are surely not so anxious to get away from this beautiful place?" asked Merze.

"Ah, no, not that! I am to come back, you know, at the end of the year if I choose, and I think I shall; it is my home you see. But you are the only lady who has ever come to see me in all the time, and you were so kind I wanted to see you again," and the blue eyes were so loving, so lovable that Merze felt the charge would be light despite Guarda's grumbling.

"But your life has been happy here?" holding the girl's hand and drawing her down beside her.

"Very happy. I would never leave for even one day, only they say it is always best. Sister Borgia has been here all her life; she is sixty, and always says fifty years of her life has been spent in Heaven. I wonder sometimes if in the world there are many who say that."

Merze did not answer, but gave her some message from Mr. Lawrence, whom Crista only knew as her guardian, as there seemed to be but little acquaintance between them. Her parents she thought both dead.

"Some of the girls questioned me about you," she said, shyly, "and asked if you were a relative. I could only tell them your name, Miss Mignot, and that Mr. Lawrence said you would be my friend, for I knew no more. Are you a relative?"

"No, my dear, I am sorry to say I am not. But I hope we shall be great friends," answered Merze, noting the disappointment in Crista's face.

"I am sorry, too," said the girl, regretfully, "every-

one seems to have some relative somewhere but me. I have wished so often for one."

"Well, then," smiled Merze, "we will pretend you have one. I also am alone, with neither brother nor sister. Why can not we be sisters?"

"Sisters! would you?" she asked, delightedly. "I would feel then on my return that there was someone in the world who belonged to me—someone I knew to pray for."

"Yes, you can pray for me; I have needed prayers such as yours often. I may need them again," answered Merze, clasping closer the little hand. "If any are heard surely yours will be."

"They are always heard; we must all know that, else what hope would we have to live by?" asked Crista, with sweet seriousness that was charming to Merze. She had seen nothing like it; this free, unembarrassed manner in speaking of her prayers or her hope was something she had never met among her own schoolmates. If they prayed, as no doubt many of them did, she felt it was not with the earnestness of this one.

The Superior, a sweet, serene-faced woman, came in to speak a few gracious words to the visitor, and, in bidding good-by to Crista, kissed her fondly with words of earnest blessing. And as the girl with tear-dimmed eyes took farewell of the others, the mother spoke aside a moment with Merze.

"She has grown very dear to us all, and our prayers will always be that she shall be kept unspotted from the world; souls like hers are not fit for it. God help you to keep her in her childish faith and innocence until she comes back to us. If she does not come we will hope that the hands caring for her will always be kind ones."

A handclasp was Merze's answer, and then they passed through the gates out into the shady road leading to the station. Crista watched the roof through the trees with tear-wet eyes.

"It seems silly to you, perhaps," she said deprecatingly to Merze. "I am too big to cry, I suppose, I was sixteen my last birthday. But I loved them so much, they were all so good to me."

"I do not think it is silly at all; it is only natural," answered Merze, but at the same time thinking, "and I, I never in my life cried at separation from any living thing. Her life without kindred is not as empty as mine was; she has her faith and the love of friends. And I, even now, have only people's admiration."

"Am I to call you Miss Mignot now that we are sisters?" asked Crista, after they were seated in the car moving swiftly south toward Delaware. Merze smiled at the attempt to learn her other name.

"Oh, no!" she replied, "my name is Merze; you can call me that without the Miss."

"Merze? Is that from Mercy?"

"I do not know what it is from, dear," and a swift shadow darkened her eyes at the remembrance of where even her name had come from.

"I think it must be from Mercy," said Crista, meditatively. "It is a sweet name. We had a sister Mercy who died; young she was, and so pretty. We loved each other dearly. I, I should like to think you were a Mercy, too."

"Well, have it so," replied Merze, carelessly. "I will be your sister Mercy to you if you prefer it."

"Will you? Ah, that would be very good of you!" said the girl, gratefully, "and when I speak the name it

will seem as if I had known you a long time. So I will have something besides memories from the convent with me all the time."

"Not *all* the time," answered Merze. "Not just yet, at least. I can not see you often at present. I am taking you to a lady who has two daughters almost your age. I hope you will be contented · but I will have to be away."

"I am so sorry. I hoped I would be with you," and the red mouth quivered a little at the thought of being separated from her new-found friend and sister.

"I should be glad if it could be so," answered Merze, regretfully, "but I have work to do that will prevent it. I shall try to see you as often as possible this summer, but when I am too busy to come I shall expect long letters. And if at any time you are not contented, let me know at once.

Crista said no more, but opened her eyes a little when Merze spoke of work. She wondered what work this wonderfully dressed lady could do, for to her everything seemed bright and rich in contrast to the quiet tones of the convent habit.

Two girlish faces were watching from the window of the porticoed house on the bay as Crista walked beside her new sister up the path lined with graceful elms. As they neared the steps the faces made a rush for the door, and stood pleased, yet a little shyness showing in their flushed cheeks—round cheeks with health's own beauty in them. Crista looked like a white lily beside them.

"Stella, Edie, this is your new companion, Crista Loring," said Merze, and then turned to speak to a motherly looking lady who entered with a hearty welcome

in her cheery voice, and whom she mentioned to Crista as Mrs. Nelson.

The girls at once took possession of Crista, showing her the room which was to be hers, and in which were many things selected by Merze herself, with all the draperies of inexpensive but pretty pink and white stuff, a small shelf filled with books, in all of which her name was written, and from which they could scarcely draw her to look at their birds, their garden, and the lovely view down the bay, where white sails dipped lazily over the blue water.

In the pretty, homely sitting-room Merze and Mrs. Nelson were left alone.

"And she is to return to the convent, you say?" asked the latter, glancing out toward the girls, one on each side of Crista, taking her down to the boat house.

"That is not decided; her guardian wants her to see a little of worldly life first, then she can choose for herself. She has no relatives, I can not take her with me, and I want a home for her where she can enjoy companions of her own age. I would like her to ride, to row, to go to any amusements you would have your own daughters attend, to enjoy her life in every way possible during her stay; I do not fear she will abuse her privileges."

"I feel sure she will not; her face shows that. It is very subdued beside the exuberance of my own girls. I think they will be a mutual benefit to each other."

"And another thing; my profession as you know, is theatrical. She only knows that I work and travel, and for the present I don't care to have her know more. Her training may have prejudiced her—I have not known her long enough to be sure—and I prefer to begin our friendship with no feeling of antipathy between us. After she

has seen and known a little more I shall tell her, but not at present."

"I understand," said Mrs. Nelson quietly, "and I think you are quite right."

Merze remained two days, not caring to leave until the girl felt at home in her new quarters, and it was difficult to be a stranger long with the two cheery girls as companions.

"I feel I shall be very happy here, sister Mercy," she said that night as she lay in her pink covered bed, a little tired with the day's excitement, "and they are so kind, not quietly, but with all their hearts. And then the books there! I could sit all night looking at them. You have been very, very good to me."

"I hope everyone will always be," said Merze, kissing her good-night, and thinking "Massa Mark is right; one's self is not enough; we must love something."

CHAPTER XXII.

"And he is to remain?"

"Yes; he is to remain," answered Guarda, snappishly, smoothing out a fold in his newspaper with a vicious slap of the hand.

Merze laughed as she looked at him. "What a bear you are getting to be, Massa Mark; why is it? In the old days you were gentle always, I was then sure of a smile, and now—well, I have to coax for them and they are very wintry sometimes."

"In the old days," he echoed. "Yes; your heart was all in your work then, I had great ambitions for you.

Now you will fill your head with imaginary duties foreign to your art. You give many of your thoughts to a child who is nothing to you, but who makes you dissatisfied with yourself. Don't deny it," as she raised her head in protest, "I know your face so well, my Merze; it was very dreamy, very thoughtful, on your return, not nearly so much interested in business. You had seen a phase of life never shown you before ; it has a picturesque holiness about it, and is to you a beautiful picture in subdued tints, restful to the senses, making you feel as you gaze that all color is vulgar in comparison. Don't I know you? Now listen. Suppose that stately, sweet-faced, sweet-voiced 'mother' who talked to you inside that vine-covered convent had been short, squatty, with coarse hands, and a broad brogue ; suppose their habits were of red and green ; suppose the girl had been shock-headed, with a squint in her eyes ; suppose——"

"There, there, Mephisto," laughed Merze, "no more if you love me ; don't spoil all my beautiful ideas. They may be superficial, but they were a pleasure to me ; don't destroy all my illusions."

"I want to awaken you from any that may take thoughts from your work. Do you know the opening date was settled last night?"

"No ; when is it to be?"

"The second of September. Your first experience with a stock company as a star."

And then they talked of the costumes, the company, and the play, themes on which there was always something to be said.

Orlane had translated a late Parisian success for her in which she was to be the attraction. A manager is always willing to risk his money on an undoubted suc-

cess, and her portrayal of *Hesta* had been a revelation in a way. The public, anxious to see her in something else, were not surprised when the announcement was made that she was to appear in a play by a noted French author, and that the manager of the Chalet contracted with her for the coming season.

Lawrence she seldom saw, but when she did she noticed that he looked much better. The many business arrangements, letter writing, etc., kept him busy, and seemed to give him back a little of his old confidence in his luck. Letters came regularly from Crista—loving, childish letters filled with thanks for her many pleasures. They were happiness to Merze, making her feel that one creature at least was benefited through herself, and was in a way dependent on her making her feel that she had something to take care of.

She kept the same unpretentious rooms as at first, refusing to move to a more fashionable neighborhood, though even Guarda advised it.

"No," she said, decidedly, "I have become attached to it; no other would feel so home-like. It was here I first earned an independence, and I am not fickle in my attachments."

But she allowed herself more comforts and luxuries than of old; etchings, engravings, and *bric-a-brac* found their way into her little parlor, and made it pretty and bright for the admiration of many who called now, but to whom she was unknown before *Hesta*.

She was in a way a mystery to people, but none the less attractive. Her only personal friend seemed to be Guarda, and of him, with all his years among them, none knew much. Some even thought her his daughter; but her years of self-repression in childhood did not tend to

make her communicative now, and of her native place none heard her speak.

"I am from the West," she had said to some, and said no more.

She always read the news from Mexico until Guarda laughed at her.

"You are getting curious as the rest of your sex," he said one day, "you who used scarcely glance at a daily. You are not getting up an interest in foreign politics, are you? Don't, for our own political affairs are in a deep enough muddle; but cross the water in any direction and you find it deeper."

She laid down the paper carelessly, and he picked it up. Often she wondered at her own interest in this stranger. He had been kind—most kind that day, but, after all, it was one day in a child's life, though its coloring had tinged the rest of her days ever since. She felt a half-scorn of herself for caring about the displeasure in his eyes that night of *Hesta*.

"Why should I care?" she asked herself, impatiently. "There were plenty more to praise my work. Perhaps it might be well for me to meet him some time. I fear I would find my girlish ideal had very shapeless clay feet. Well, ideals and illusions of that sort are good for children, if it makes them ambitious, as it did me, but women can not afford to harbor them. I had nothing else—no other friend; that was, I suppose, the only reason I remembered him so well. Yet he, he sees me here, but does not care enough to remember or to speak."

That one thought rankled deeper than she would acknowledge to herself; that it was which brought up those soliloquies so often in her mind, in which she persuaded herself after all that her fancies and thoughts

of him were childish and that they were all over years ago.

Yet she still read those weekly letters from Mexico, letters so well constructed, and so brilliantly descriptive that she found them copied and re-copied in many papers, the only signature to them being Drande.

This day she sat silent, only the crackle of the newspaper Guarda had filched breaking the quiet. An exclamation from him raised her eyes. He was evidently pleased over something.

"Drande is coming back from Mexico," he announced.

"Drande!" she echoed. She had just been thinking of him. She never before had heard Guarda mention the name, and it seemed strange that he should now. Could he guess? but no, that was impossible. "Drande!" she repeated, "and who is he?"

"Have I never spoken of him? Ah, no, he has been away so long, first in Europe two years, now in Mexico for some time. He is a friend of mine, if I own such a thing. A writer and a clever one, I think. You must have seen some of his correspondence from Mexico; it is for this paper he was working."

"Yes," she said, quietly. "I have read them. And he is a friend of yours, and is coming back here?"

"Certainly, here; this is his farewell letter, see? It says so. He may be here soon, any time now."

"And you care for him so much? I shall be jealous and wish him back in Mexico."

"Not when you see him. I think you would like each other. It is a long time since I had letters from him. He used to write very often, but now I am getting too old to answer many, so he only sends me papers lately or kind wishes by friends. The opening night of "Hesta"

he was in front a moment, but on business. He left a kind word for me, but could not wait to speak."

She sat long after Guarda had gone, thinking over what he had said. They were friends; then surely she must meet him—and how? Would he care to remember? She found herself wondering, debating about this man whose opinion she had just persuaded herself was of no interest to her.

"Clever, is he?" she thought, rising and looking at herself in the mirror. "Well, the people say the same of me; my standing is as much assured as his own, let him look ever so contemptuous."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A week later she attended, with Guarda, a benefit at one of the theatres—a professional affair for some needy brother worker—and who has ever found them, as an organization, with closed ears when help was needed? It was almost entirely a theatrical audience, and the cheeriest one that can be imagined. There is always someone with a nod and a smile for everyone. There are the closest of hand-clasps at meeting, and the most earnest of "God bless you, old friends," at parting. Their partings so often are so wide—the width of the world and for life, many have found them, and it lends a tenderness to many a laughing voice from which an outsider would expect nothing but jests.

It was always a pleasure to Merze to see them on any occasion of this kind. "Surely, such an audience would be an inspiration to any actor," she thought, looking out on the bright, intelligent faces. She had a box, and from

it could see more than half the house. Guarda had gone out to speak to friends at the door. The foot-lights flashing up quickly was the signal for silence of orchestra and audience. She glanced out through the mass at the door in hopes of seeing him. He himself detested the moving of people to seats when the curtain was up, but he surely would transgress this time ; but he was not to be seen.

"Someone has button-holed him, as he terms it," she thought, smiling, as she knew he would be impatient in losing part of the act. Then she turned to the stage and forgot about him in the interest of the bright comedy before her. As the curtain fell on the first act, leaving all in a good humor at the ridiculously funny situations, she was aware of Guarda's entrance, and as she turned, still laughing, to speak, she saw beyond him another figure, taller, younger, darker. She did not see the face at first, but the laugh died on her lips as she heard Guarda speak her name. Everything seemed dim and far away for a moment ; then she recovered herself, and held out her hand to the man, who bowed over it, but who looked at the hand, not at her face. She had not heard the introduction, but she did not need to be told his name.

"You are much of a stranger in your own land of late, so Massa Mark tells me," she managed to say, as he took a chair near in obedience to Guarda's invitation.

"Massa Mark ?" he queried, in the voice she had never once forgotten.

"She means me," said Guarda, smiling. Merze had never seen him with such kindness in his eyes for anyone except herself.

"Yes," she explained, "I forget sometimes and call

him so before strangers, though I hope I shall never have to class you among that list again."

If he discerned any hidden meaning in the words he did not show it.

"Your hope flatters me," he said, quietly, and she felt as if she had received a dash of cold water in the face. Where was his old grace and kindness of speech? It was all the imagination of a child, she thought, bitterly. What right had he to come at all, if he only meant to speak like that, as if to show her he did not want to remember?

"Yes, he has been away so long he is becoming a barbarian," said Guarda. "I could scarcely get him inside the theatre, he who used to live in there, almost, but I would not hear to him going by without you meeting each other—my two nearest friends in the world. I have spoken of you to her, and, as she says, you must not be a stranger."

"And on our part, Massa Mark," said Merze, kindly, "we must not force Mr. Drande's inclinations. You forced him in to see me, but we must not shackle him as soon as he gets inside with rash vows of friendship. Did you see Mr. Orlane?" she asked, changing the conversation, as if the subject was ended for all time.

Guarda comprehended there was something antagonistic between his friends, but could not see where it lay. Was the fault his? Had he made a blunder in speaking of Drande's reluctance to enter? Still Merze was not generally like that; she was inclined to be more pleased if strangers staid away altogether. She disliked meeting them always. For Guarda's sake they tried to be more companionable, speaking of the play, the players, the improved furnishings of the theatre, of all things they

cared nothing for, but she noticed that not once did he speak of her work, or anything connected with her personally.

"Ah, that is it!" she thought, "in his lordly way he disapproves of my vocation, and thinks to make me feel his indifference. Does he think me still a child, to care?"

Orlane entered the box a little later, and to him Merze turned warmly. They were on very good terms. His admiration for her was very palpable to any seeing them together, and they were soon chatting in the most friendly manner. Remarks were at times directed to Drande, but though he answered politely, he confined his attention to Guarda, much to the latter's delight.

With his face in profile toward her, Merze could note, without his knowledge, the features she had thought so perfect, and which now looked cynical and tired, and a little harsher in outline, especially the jaws, that looked as if set tightly together. She was watching him, though commenting to Orlane on the new leading man for the piece he had translated for her *début* as the acknowledged leading lady of the Chalet.

"Don't, Mr. Orlane," she said, with gay beseeching, "pray don't encourage them to get Ladean; how do you expect me to play those love scenes with a man like that? He has about as much animation as a wooden man, and will neither fall nor get down on his knees without looking for the softest rug on the stage to kneel on."

And Orlane laughingly announced himself as "willing to play the part, and submit to as many rehearsals of the love scenes as she thought necessary to their perfection," at which they both laughed, for it was well known that Orlane could not read even his own verses creditably.

It was only harmless badinage, but it was such as neither Guarda nor Orlane had ever known her to give way to. They did not know it was the contemptuous look in the eyes opposite that inspired her with the recklessness of the moment.

"Since he thinks to constitute himself a silent judge, he may as well have something to arraign me for," she thought, and was not surprised when he rose and made his adieux.

"I shall expect you at dinner to-morrow," he said to Orlane and Guarda, and then to Merze, bowing low, he said, "Good-by, Miss Mignot."

She smiled up serenely in his dark face. "Not 'good-by,' surely, *au revoir*."

He did not answer, but turned and left the box. From where she sat she could see him reach the door, stop a moment and look back across the mass of faces to her own, and then disappear in the lobby.

"A peculiar character, and a splendid fellow," said Orlane, as he left, "but he has changed much, don't you think so, Guarda?"

"Changed? Yes, he is not the careless Bohemian of ten years ago," answered the old man, thoughtfully; he is steadier, more settled, and I scarcely know which phase of character is the most attractive, his nonsense then or his thought now. This is certainly the more commendable, for he had just run through a fortune then, and was oceans in debt. He has cleared them away, and is laying the foundation for another one now; one that will not scatter so easily. It makes a big difference who garners the grain as to whose fowl eats it."

"Did you know Drande before?" asked Orlane of Merze.

"I have seen a face his reminded me of."

Guarda looked quickly at her.

"I did not know that ; you did not mention it."

"Why should I?" she answered, carelessly. "I did not know he was your friend. I saw him that first night of 'Hesta'; he was in a box. I asked Mr. Orlane who he was, because his face resembled one I had seen. This man's name is strange to me, and, on seeing him closer, I can discover but little similarity. It was a mistake easily made. It was years ago when I last saw the face I speak of. Time enough to forget multitudes of them."

But her careless words did not satisfy the keen eyes of Guarda. She was not used to subterfuge any more than to coquetry, and was awkward at it.

"Has her life also its turned-down page?" he thought, "and has Drande anything to do with it? At least it could not have been a love affair. Six years ago. No, it is impossible ; she was only a child then They do not like each other, that is all ; nothing for an old man to be suspicious over."

CHAPTER XXIV.

"And the people like her so well?"

"'Like' does not express it, there is something refreshing about her work, it is so natural, apparently so unstudied. But there one would be mistaken, for she has worked and studied very hard, and under Guarda, a taskmaster few have the courage to begin with. He is very exacting, but for Mignot he seems to have great affection, and she for him. A few words of praise from him

is more to her than all the compliments and adulation younger men would shower on her if they had the chance —an opportunity they never get. Their bouquets are divided among the company, their notes are handed to Guarda. She meets but few people outside those connected with the profession, and her very exclusiveness makes her the more attractive to her audience."

"She has at least an admirer in you," said Drande, with a quizzical smile.

"Yes," answered Orlane, "she certainly has. I always admired her, and when she made a success of 'Hesta' for me, I felt myself under obligations to her that could never be settled with salary.

"They tell me the play is beautiful. Don't give her all the credit; many a woman might have done as well for you."

"I don't believe it. I am past all hope," as Drande laughed a little sarcastically. "No one's opinion against her work would weigh an iota with me. Our friendship is purely platonic, but on my side it is very earnest, and she is a lady whose friends may always be proud of the distinction."

Orlane's words were so decided as to be almost a challenge. The other lit a cigar slowly, and leaned back to enjoy it.

"Hard hit," he murmured, lazily. "My dear fellow, long may they continue to be proud. I say nothing against her, I scarcely know her. Do you expect your friends to worship blindly as well as yourself? She did not seem to me very gracious in her manner."

"What did you expect, a flirtation akin to the many in your years that are gone? Guarda would scarcely have introduced you had he thought it."

"Come, come, Orlane, let us drop the subject. You are not good-humored to-day, and women always breed trouble wherever their names are let creep in. Take an old man's advice, and give them a wide berth."

"What a patriarch one would imagine you! Most of your years have had long summers at all events, for they lie on you lightly; forty you must be, and you look no more than twenty-five, at the farthest."

"I was thirty-eight my last birthday," answered the other, resignedly, "and shall expect an increase of gray hairs if you serve up 'Mignot' for me as a very monotonous garnish for every dish at our iunches, as you have done to-day."

"Confound you!" laughed the other, "you have no soul in you."

"None to prostrate before your shrine."

"Yet she had some little interest in you, after all; you resemble someone she had known, and she asked your name that night you stopped to see North, on your way to Mexico."

"Indeed? I suppose the correct thing to say is that I am wretched at not being the man she knew, but I am not, I'm quite comfortable, thank you."

"Entirely too much so. Put on your nat and come to the theatre; we have a rehearsal to-day. Guarda will be glad to see you; come along."

"No, thanks, I'm very well here; be off with you! I know you don't care for outsiders, and your high priestess, your one star in the heavens, might frown on an intruder, and that would be annihilation. I won't risk it."

And Orlane left him there, the picture of indolence, leaning back in an adjustable chair, and puffing out smoke until there was a perfect haze about him.

"Poor Orlane," he thought, compassionately, "how very earnest he is. So she made inquiries about me? Then she knew who I was, and that we were likely to meet. Her reception of me was not unstudied; that is well to know, though it is not flattering. Of course," stretching himself at full length, with hands clasped back of his head, "of course there is no reason why she would care to remember. I did nothing for her, though I would have been fool enough to do much had it been possible, and how lovely, how bright, how ambitious she was; and how strong the young heart. It is buried fathoms deep beneath her laces now, and her pride is so false that it fears any who have known her poverty. Bah, she is worthless!"

And, rising impatiently, he began opening a box brought in that morning by the expressman.

"Dear old mother!" he thought, as he lifted out some books carefully wrapped, "you are worth them all, with their beauty, their grace, and their shallow souls."

He had taken his rooms but a week before, and had nothing of his own in decorations or furnishings as yet. The box was one his mother had sent him from home, filled with some of his favorite belongings. In one compartment were books, a couple of bronze busts, a smoking set, a box filled with papers of all sizes and shapes, some slippers, and various comforts of his mother's manufacture. In the other were several pictures, some of his own work, and some of his friends.

Each seemed an old companion as he turned them to the light, with first a landscape with the soft, hazy pink of a June sunset; again, a dancing girl, with dress of the East, and bronze limbs like sun-kissed satin; a madonna, with softly curved arms, in which the child nestled; a

sweet, fair face drawing a curtain, and enough to show behind it a smooth white shoulder and a flood of sunny hair, laughing it was, with the little pearls of teeth showing between red lips.

"So harmless looking, so innocent in your pretty, alluring ways, and so—like all of your kind," and he laid it aside to lift out one of a child sleeping in a little hollow, backed by the black roots of an overturned tree.

He looked at it long and critically.

"What freak of fate induced the little mother to rake this up and send it now of all times? It is better work than I can do of late years. I did it about the time I discovered that, after all my study, Art, in its highest form, would always be impossible to me. I was, and would remain, an amateur. I wonder"—and his mouth curved with a smile that had little gayety in it—"I wonder how Mademoiselle Mignot would appreciate it as a present. However I shall not test her. My walls are bare enough to need them all."

And he hung it where the light fell softly over the shady green of the foliage, and the fair grace of the childish form. Then, putting on his hat, he sauntered out into the sunshine. He was not in the humor for work, and the walls of a house were too close for him. Here and there he met an acquaintance, but did not stop to talk. He hesitated at a bookstore about going in for a magazine. While he stood, a man came to the window pinning in it an engraving, at which he glanced, and then turned impatiently away. It was the lovely face he knew so well. Beneath it was her autograph—Merze Mignot. It was one of the lithographs for the new play.

"Am I to see her face everywhere?" he muttered, and

walked on, on aimlessly until he heard his name spoken, and, turning, found Guarda beside him.

"Where are you going in that fashion, with your eyes on the ground?" asked this character always privileged with Drande. "Miserable?"

"Not at all," he answered, smiling. "I am sorry to disappoint you, but I feel all right."

"Sorry? Come with me; I had to go home for some forgotten manuscripts. The folks are waiting; come along."

He did not say who was waiting or where he was going, but Drande turned and walked, talking with him until, before he noticed where they were going, he found himself before the Chalet, the very place he had refused to go an hour before.

"No matter," insisted Guarda, "come in; no excuses, I want your opinion on some designs for furniture—historical. You know a little of everything, and may help me out; come along."

Orlane looked up in surprise as he entered. Down the aisle Merze was exchanging a few necessary words with Lawrence. They spoke briefly, and as he left her, she turned toward the door, hearing Guarda's voice, and met again the dark, displeased eyes of Drande. She nodded to him coolly, but did not speak.

"Is there anything I could do," she thought, wrathfully, "that he would not try to frown down?"

And he, knowing much of Lawrence's reputation, was thinking. "And it is men like that she meets on equality—that is the 'greatness' she has won!"

"Merze, do you see Mr. Drande," asked Guarda, coming down. "Away down street I found him, intimating that he was happy. I couldn't stand that, so

brought him to share with us the miseries of a rehearsal. Be seated until I get back with the designs, my child ; you are not on for a half hour, sit down ; you will be tired enough before you get home. Here, Orlane, are the manuscripts." And he shuffled away, leaving those two alone silent.

A girl was rehearsing a simple little song in a fresh, sweet voice. Orlane stopped beside them to listen.

"She has a voice clear as a lark's," he said, passing on.

"Clear, yes, but weak," remarked Drande, not turning his head, and thinking Orlane still there.

"I fear we are all that in the critical eyes of Mr. Drande," answered Merze, half in anger with herself that his looks and manner had power to vex her so. "We, in our work, are as the hollow reeds by the river, through which the waters and the winds rustle musically at times. The music was imprisoned in them by a God long ago, who found the sounds sweet ; but the cynic of this age sees in them only brown stalks, hears in them only the sluggish surge of the blood in his own veins as he holds them close to his ear and listens." He smiled as she spoke in the fanciful language she had used that long-past day. He could hear so clearly the vibration of anger in her voice, and knew it was for herself she resented his criticism ; not for the girl singing. For the first time he turned and looked at her face to face.

"Thanks," he said, at last, "for the place you assign me in your metaphor. I knew once a reed, such as you speak of ; an untamed thing with all its wild music shut in a little form too slight, I fear, for its preservation. The jostle with the world in the strife for 'greatness' shatters all frail things."

He ceased a moment. She did not answer; her head bent lower, that was all. Her hand slipped from the back of the chair into her lap. On it gleamed still that cluster of opal and diamonds which Lawrence had insisted on her keeping. On her wrist was an odd, foreign-looking bracelet given her by Guarda, formed of curious flat chains united by a clasp of brilliants. The light falling across them left a sparkle and glitter over the white hand. It caught his eye, and he smiled as he looked.

She, seeing his glance, drew the hand back quickly.

"Ah!" and he rose. "There are compensations, perhaps. But you speak of the music of the reeds; there is a music akin to it spoken of in the Talmud—of a flute that had been held sacred since the days of Moses. It was slight and slender, with the sweetest of sounds in its breath; but a king, wishing to give it greater beauty and richness, had it overlaid with gold and set with jewels. It was dazzling to the eye, but the music in its heart was gone forever—smothered under the weight of the gold."

Mark, coming a few minutes later, found her alone, resting her head on the back of the chair in front of her.

"Where is Drande?" he asked, quickly.

"Gone, I believe. I fear I was not entertaining. My head aches a little. Are they ready for me now?"

CHAPTER XXV.

Those two met often, but seldom showed to good advantage in each other's eyes. Their friends were the same people, and, in the same circle of upper Bohemia, they could not help hearing each other's names, and generally in praise. But the spark of discord had fallen

that night when his eyes showed displeased amazement, gazing down on the wide-eyed, startled *Hesta*. Why had he looked displeased ? He could scarcely have told himself. Many actresses were of his acquaintance, many whom he respected and honored as noble wives, devoted mothers. But she, that child in the hills, he had always felt as if in a way had belonged to him. No other evidently had ever touched the depths of her needs and appreciated them as he had done ; to no other, he felt sure, had she ever uncovered so entirely her childish, vague longing. It made him feel, after a fashion, as an explorer who stumbles over a jewel whose brightest gleams were shown but to his eye. To be sure he had let it go without demur to its rightful owners, who, he supposed, had kept it somewhere in the peace of some nook, sheltered from the changing, warring winds of the world.

And that night when he saw her, it was with the sense that something, deemed his own, had been given without his will to the crowds to hiss or encore as they chose. The glittering jewel was enjoyed alike by all, gleamed for all ; she belonged to the people.

It was only the nature of the man in him, with all the selfishness which the word holds. Had she remained always in some home apart from his world, he would have remembered kindly, with the interest of an analyst, the strange nature to which he felt no other was so likely to gain the key. His words—oh, egotism !—he felt sure she would keep with her. He had not thought to see her ever; more than likely he had never really wished to in all the six years, unless it had been just at first, when deep sorrow had moved him often to think regretfully that he could not have cared for her himself. But after

that she was only thought of as a picturesque character, until, all in a moment, a vail seemed to have lifted and showed her to him in a light that wavered from amazement to resentment, and then to injustice.

Poor old Mephisto's occupation was gone. There was no need for mimic miseries such as the loving heart so often pretended it reveled in, a pretense that covered many a kindly act.

His favorite, his child, as he called her often, worked harder than ever. His ambition for her was not likely to be in vain, but gradully he found a change creeping into her life. The old quiet was gone, she did not object so much as she used to when he asked her to go among friends more. Why was it? he asked, unless because her old, quiet, home life did not content her. There was not so much time someway for those long, happy talks as there used to be. Or, if at times they found themselves alone, he noticed a lack of the old eagerness for the tales, the reminiscences tinged with the poetic flavor from the Spanish lips. Those tales of the past generation of our actors had always been interesting to her as he told them, with here a bit of anecdote, there a sarcastic simile carrying perhaps a life's lesson under its bitterness, and again, some touch of human nature's depth appealing to the heart of his listener. It was all gone. Often he knew she sat with closed ears and thoughts far removed from either the business or pastime in which he tried to interest her.

If he had known the thoughts were happy ones ne would not have cared, but he felt they were not. Several times he had seen her meditating with contemptuous curved lips and moody eyes, with the moodiness in them of sullen, brooding storms. She was loving, tender as

ever to him, only she was silent as to her own thoughts. Sometimes he feared it was concerning Lawrence ; he was drinking some of late, not enough to interfere with his duties, but, perhaps, enough to cause her apprehension as to the future. He never came near her except as business required it, for which she was thankful.

Just once she had seen him with the signs of intoxication in his manner. It was on the street ; he had not spoken, had only looked at her and smiled, but she felt herself turning sick with a great disgust, knowing that her life must be free only through his lenity.

She knew that his past had much in it to commend his promises, and to the dead they had been kept inviolate ; but he was changing much, so Guarda told her. At times he was drinking deeply, something he had never done before. It debases so many, and how was she to know what depths it might lead him to, or whether it would allow him to hold any promise sacred?

So many new currents seemed drifting into her life since that night when she first awakened the people to a sense of her own strength. Before that there had been only Massa Mark and herself, and how happy, how carefree they were ! Now there was Crista ; but for that she had no regret, and through what she felt now was a mistaken sense of justice, Lawrence had drifted back and was of her life though not in it, a nightmare that would chase forever all contented dreams. And then there was that dark, mocking face that always brought uppermost in her nature its worst traits, the recklessness of an untrained nature filled with pride, resentment, and an assumption of contemptuous disdain.

To Guarda, the only one who noticed it, no explanation of his own could satisfy his mind.

"My friend, he said one day, in the sanctuary of his own den, with its smell of tobacco, its queer paraphernalia of the mimic art, its scene-plots and manuscripts shoved away in piles or dangling from hooks on the wall, while loose lay a mass of engravings—Macready as *Richard*, Forrest as *Coriolanus*, the elder Wallack as *Mercutio*, Cushman's square, strong face as *Lady Macbeth*, and dozens of dead faces whose charm is remembered but by the few, though their names will reach down through the dim columns of the future. To the old man those faces were very dear. Many had been earnest friends, and all reminded him of a past that had not been sombre. He was gathering them up to show Merze, and talking to Drande as he did so.

"My friend," he repeated; "how is it that you and my protegé seem always to be at sword's-points?"

"Are we? I was not aware of it. She seems a charming lady to her friends, from what I hear. I am only an acquaintance."

"I had hoped you would be friends," the old man said, wistfully. "I like you both well. I do not see you speak often, but when you do it is coldly, with hauteur. I do not think you can have any idea of the strong, loving heart. It seems a pity, for you would appreciate the fine nature if you could know her as I do, brave beneath a yoke heavier, I fear, than you or I could estimate. Careless in her manner, while her thoughts are busy with the welfare of others, for she, herself, is the last consideration. What she imagines her duty is sacred to her, poor child! I fancy that faith to supposed duties has brought much misery in her life."

"Why, Guarda, old fellow, you are talking dismally

to-day of a much envied woman. I fancy she is very well satisfied with her life."

"With her work, perhaps, yes," he acknowledged. "Why should she not be? It is good. But of the life, ah! who can tell? I care for her very much; she is as a daughter to me, but lately I am anxious at times. I speak only to you of her thus. I scarcely know why, only at times I fancy you think her shallow, frivolous, but you must not; it is a very brave, very deep nature; worthy of your respect."

"My dear old friend, she has it for your sake if nothing else," replied the other. "Perhaps, as you say, I have not known her well enough to judge; but she has many friends, and she does not seem anxious to add my name to the list, and I have little time now for making new ones; but she has my best wishes. May her friends and her lovers be always constant."

"Ah! that is where you make the mistakes regarding her," broke in Guarda; "you class her like that in a contemptuous manner. She does not deserve it. Lovers, bah! no, she will have no lovers."

"Not?" and a quick gleam crossed the dark eyes. "Then I am to infer there is one already in the field? Many are curious as to your protegé's history; a lover in the background would be something at all events."

"They can remain curious," announced Guarda, decidedly. "I can say only that she deserves all respect. Her art must make a history for her; other than that I fear she will never have to give. But there is no lover; there has, I feel sure, never been one, and, for her sake, I hope there never will be."

"There are, I should imagine, several prominent aspirants for the position."

"Aspirants? bah! She cares more for me than for all of them put together. Oh, laugh, if that amuses you! but it is true. It is because I am getting old and she thinks in a way that I need her; that also is true. I could not do without her now, and you, you are almost old enough to be her father, and are my friend. If you would only be sensible, you two, we might have many pleasant hours together. But no; I am between two fires with you. I am going there with these old engravings now; come along."

"No, no, Guarda, let me at least wait for an invitation, which I shall never get," he added, in his own thoughts.

That night he stood long looking at the face of the sleeping child.

"'A great trouble' he said, poor old Guarda; he may, through love for her, imagine it greater than it is—a great burden. Well, I, at least, will never be able to help her bear it now. Ah! why should I? She is nothing to me, and, as he said, I am almost old enough to be her father. Yes, perhaps, but that day in the theatre with her head bent, after those sarcastic, angry words, someway I did not feel like it—not nearly so much as when I painted that. But there can be no friendship between us, and—she is to have no lover."

CHAPTER XXVI.

That opening night of the season at the Chalet was a memorable one to Merze. It was her first part as acknowledged leading lady. Her friends were enthusiastic over her success in a part entirely opposite in character to *Hesta*—a young wife in a French comedy,

with all the brightness, the *verve,* and dash in it that was sparkling as light wine.

She was a surprise to many. Drande, near the door, heard many flattering comments, but turned angrily as close to him a man spoke as if of a race-horse.

"By Jove! I told her she couldn't do that sort of thing, but she can. I didn't think she had it in her."

It was Lawrence His face was a little flushed. He had been drinking, but was not intoxicated. Drande checked the quick words that sprung to his lips, for, after all, what right had he? This man was, perhaps, privileged to speak in that manner—as of one who discussed with her, her capabilities. Thus she chose her friends, he thought bitterly, and only his eyes, angry and indignant, turned toward the speaker, who saw it and felt a little amused, though it brought him to his senses. If sober he never would have spoken in that way, but he stood looking at Drande for quite a while thinking: "Why does he resent it? There is no friendship between them—at least on her side; she shows that in her manner. And he—it would be odd if he should care for her, he who has passed his time pleasantly, but has never been credited with a serious affair in all the years I have known him. Well, it will be of no use with Merze. She will care nothing for any man. I used to be afraid of that, but it was interest thrown away. Her head is too level ever to make such a mistake. I wonder if it ever crosses their minds that they met down there in Kentucky. She, I suppose, has forgotten it. She was only a child, but he, he left that card for her and was interested, so the nurse said. By Jove! it never struck me before. He *does* recognize her. He *is* interested in her still, that is why he resents trifles for her and glares at

me like that. What if he knew the truth? Ah, my fine, very correct gentleman! you are wasting your time in this game."

And in a way it gave him pleasure to think it. He had never liked Drande. There was something in his manner that had always warded off any attempts at sociability or equality from men of Lawrence's stamp. It had galled him often, more than one would have thought of the jaunty, seemingly careless, gambler.

And now, standing there looking at him, as he watched with moody eyes every movement of the woman on the stage, there came a sort of satisfaction in her possession across his mind, a feeling that, after all, by legal right she was his; that he had the power to keep forever out of reach of this fine, scornful, supercilious gentleman the thing which he felt he desired.

The play was over and the people gone, all except a few attachés and some friends of Orlane who had waited, among them North and Drande, who stood at the entrance chatting. They heard Guarda's voice coming out and turned to speak.

With him was Merze, looking tired, but evidently pleased at some praise of Guarda. As they reached the entrance she glanced at the gentlemen and said good-night as she passed.

"One moment, Guarda," said Orlane, diving into his pockets for a letter to give him. Guarda turned, dropping Merze's arm, and she walked on a few steps alone. Two carriages were at the door; the first she walked toward thinking it was theirs. Drande of all the party stood nearest the street, and Lawrence, about to enter the theatre, saw both him and Merze. He had been drinking more. Just enough to give a tinge of bravado

to his manner, and, halting, he said : " Not that carriage, Merze, the other one," and took a step toward her which Drande, with a quick stride, intercepted.

" Allow me," he said, offering his arm, which she took silently. He could feel she was trembling ; if with anger she showed it in no other way, for she did not raise her eyes. He placed her in the carriage and stood silent at the door of it, until Guarda came shuffling down the steps and entered ; then he closed it, answering the old man's good-night, and turned back to his friends.

Merze had uttered not a word.

On the step Lawrence still stood with a peculiar look in his eyes as he noticed that Merze did not speak. Drande passed him as if he were not there, though all the blood in his veins was boiling at the insolence of the man's manner which he could not resent.

To Merze, not knowing the words were only meant to anger Drande, the manner of Lawrence's speaking to her was a shock. She could see beneath it only the thing she dreaded most—that he might again claim her as his wife. He had never once called her Merze before anyone since his return, and now to do so before that one man who thought so little of her at best—who imagined she cared but for the tinsel trappings.

She sat back in the corner of the carriage, covering her face with her hands. Vague fears were closing in around her. If she could only end all this secrecy! But there was only one way to do it, and she dared not think of it. It would mean death in life to her, and she fancied she could see the contempt in *his* eyes if he knew.

A shivering breath like a sob reached Guarda's ears above the roll of the wheels.

" What is it ?" he asked, quickly.

"Nothing, Massa Mark, only—only I am tired and a little nervous, I suppose."

"Yes, yes, it is only natural; the part is a hard working one. But, my Merze, you have been so strong; you never used to get so tired."

"I suppose I am getting old," she said, with a wan smile, as they stopped at her door. "Come in, it is not late. I shall be poor company, but I do not care to be alone; come in."

"Merze, what is it? I have seen it often lately, to-night more than all. You are unhappy."

"You know my life; do you wonder at that?" she asked, sitting in her old place on the ottoman beside him, her head on the arm of his chair.

"No, no, child," he answered, smoothing back the hair from her white forehead. "I feared it when he came back, but it is too late to regret now. You can not hope for much happiness, but try to be a philosopher and be content. You have nothing to reproach yourself with."

"That makes the trouble no lighter," she said, impatiently. "It is so hard to be a philosopher when the blood has youth in it!"

"Ah, my child, you will learn better if sin should ever touch your life," he answered, earnestly. "The knowledge of wrong-doing in ourselves can embitter our lives as no wrong from another can ever do; never forget that. There is no grave deep enough to bury remorse."

"Why do you speak of that—of sin? There has been none on either side. He has done me no wrong; but," she added, wearily, "it is fate, I suppose—all these tangled threads of life—and in some way it seems out of our power ever to get them straight."

She sat silently a little while, and then, looking up, said : "I wish to-night I was like Crista."

"Why so?" he asked, irritably. He had never become reconciled to the idea of that girl.

"Because then I would have a religious faith, such as I am sure she would lean on if placed in such a position. She would pray ; to be sure the prayers might never be answered, but hope and faith are, I think, the greatest of blessings to those who can hold them. But I, I have nothing."

Guarda looked at the bowed head with great compassion in his eyes. He had trained her in her art, he had endeavored to teach her the philosophies garnered through many years of observation. But of this other, this faith, he could teach her nothing. His faith through life had rested on himself ; honesty and truth had been his only creed, and he had found it sufficient to lead him to an upright life with charity in it toward all men. He had dipped, as Merze had, into many beliefs of many sects ; he had some knowledge of them, but had never known the need or longing for any as he felt this one did now beside him.

"My poor Merze, my poor Merze!" he said, kindly, "be content, you can not force yourself to have faith. If it does not come to you, your life must only be the stronger in order to stand alone ; and it is strong, a strong, honest heart. To-night you are nervous and a little morbid, that is all. Weak moments come to all. To-morrow you will be yourself again. You need rest, sleep ; that is it. Go to bed, and to-morrow let me see your face brighter. I am to take you to see the picture North is doing of you as *Hesta*. Good-night, my child , go to bed and dream only of your triumphs."

"My triumphs!" she thought, as she tossed with wide, sleepless eyes through the night. "When a multitude of them could not cover the scorn I feel of late for my own weakness!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A letter came to Merze from Crista the next morning. Her pleasures were so many she had not words enough to express her thanks. She had made a new friend—one of a religion that was strange to her—a Quakeress.

"Listen, Massa Mark," said Merze, when he came for her. "Let me read you a portion. Now don't be 'Mephisto'; listen."

"'My Sister Mercy:—I wish so much you could see this dear lady. She is old, but the face has not lines of care as so many have. She is to me beautiful with the peace such as seems a part of the nuns' lives. Like Sister Borgia, I think she could say much of her life has been lived in heaven, but such souls, I think, make heaven for themselves wherever they are. Her name is Mrs. Menturn. She has asked me to visit her in her home; it is some distance from here. She is a harmony in soft grays and white like a picture; but her religion is strange. It does not approve of pictures or statues. I think they miss many pleasures. Her son, she says, has many, and paints himself, but he is not a Quaker, nor was his father, who is dead. Her son is in the world like you. She seems very proud of him. Her soft 'thees' and 'thous,' are like a caress when she speaks to you. I asked her to bless me last night. She did so and kissed me. It was to me a sacrament, but you must

see her to comprehend my enthusiasm. To-day she said she hoped heaven would help her son to give her such a daughter as I. It makes me happy to know people care so much for me.' "

"There!" said Merze, looking up from the page. "Does that not give you an idea of the purity of her character? Her letters are like herself. It is no wonder they all love her. I think I might be a better woman if I could have her always with me; it would be hard for black, bitter thoughts to gain an entrance where she was."

"Ugh! a second 'Una, I suppose," grunted Guarda. "Such magic would be wasted in New York. Leave her down in Delaware; come along."

Merze laughed a little at his ill-humor. He never encouraged her to harbor any thought of Crista as a companion.

"By the way," he said, as they walked along, "speaking of Quakers, Drande is connected in some way with that sect. I forget just how; he is not one himself, but has, I think, some of their strait-laced ideas in many ways."

"Indeed!" was all Merze replied, but she was thinking. "And, perhaps, he has somewhere a mother like that, his ideal of what woman should be. Small wonder then if the rest of us seem hollow and of little worth in comparison."

Neither Guarda nor herself referred again to their conversation of the night before. They both avoided it. There are so many moods that come with the darkness, and are banished by the sun's rays, and the old man looking at her face as she smiled at him, felt it was so with this one. Young faces do not show easily the effects of sleepless nights.

When they reached North's rooms they found him working busily.

"But come," he said, laying down his brushes, "Your picture was only put in the frame this morning. We took it to Drande's room. The light is much better there—lucky dog to get it; come along."

Merze hesitated "In Mr. Drande's room?" she said.

"Yes, in the other corridor," said Guarda. "Did I not tell you they had rooms in the same building? I have never been to see him myself since he got settled."

She saw she was expected to go. There was, of course, no real reason why she should not, and North not noticing her hesitation, was leading the way.

Mark took her by the hand, walking beside her.

"You do not really object?" he asked.

"Oh, no! Why should I?"

"You two never seem to be very good friends, but try to be more kind to him for my sake."

She gave him a little curious glance but said nothing.

And Drande, lolling back in a chair with some "copy" which he was endeavoring to correct, found the pictured face of the *Hesta* opposite interfering sadly with his work, until at last the loose sheets dropped to the floor beside him, as he gazed at the rapt face and fathomless eyes. He recognized North's tap at the door, and called "Come in," without moving his eyes or position. The door opened and the soft rustle of a woman's dress caused him to turn. In the doorway stood the living *Hesta*, with a half-reluctance in her manner as the old man, a step in advance, led her in.

In one moment, as her eyes met his, all the feeling against her disappeared, the half-doubts, the vague

resentment, vanished as he went forward and took her other hand. His words were friendly and courteous, which Guarda noted with pleasure.

As for Merze, she scarcely knew what he said. His words were scarcely heard. She saw only the gladness in his eyes at her coming, a gladness that sent the blood quick to her heart, and then tingled through all her veins with a warmth that caused her eyes to drop beneath his own as she drew away her hand lest he should feel its trembling. For one instant in her life she realized what living might mean.

It was as a flash of lightning after which the dark seems dense ; close in its track, came the recollection of what she was. She closed her eyes blindly, dizzily, and sat down in the chair nearest her.

She heard their voices speaking of the picture. His voice was among the others, but she felt his eyes were on her face, that he was keeping the attention of the rest away from her. " That must not be ; he must not think me so weak as to need his help," she thought. She stood up, one hand on the back of the chair. He, seeing it, moved toward her, but with an effort she turned from him to Guarda and spoke a few words of comment on the picture ; what, she did not know, anything to show an interest in the work and keep Guarda or Drande from noticing any change in her manner, or attributing it to the right cause.

The picture was worthy of all praise. Guarda was in ecstasies over it. It had been bought by the owner of the Chalet where it was to be hung. Merze thanked the artist kindly for the interest he had given it, and spoke to him and to Guarda. But try as she would she could not find any word of pictures or art to say to Drande.

"Sit down again, Merze," said Guarda, noticing her face. "You look a little pale; tired, I suppose, with the walk; it was rather long."

"Certainly," said Drande, coming forward, "take this chair," and he wheeled the most comfortable into position. "Bachelors' rooms are not famed for their neatness, and this is scarcely fit for the entertainment of a lady, but consider yourself an honored guest in my domains."

"Fit! nonsense!" growled Guarda, "it is very good; a picture in itself. I don't like primness. Now, there's my den, it's a picture, too, for some Dickensonian artist. But this, with its height of ceiling, its fluted cornicing and those amber curtains, it looks quite a palace. Who cares for a few papers scattered around? Those bronzes are very fine. There are some pictures I have not seen before—your own?"

"Some of them, done years ago. I don't paint now. I have learned better," answered Drande.

He was watching Merze; her manner puzzled him. Where had that gleam of warmth gone that had flooded all her face for that instant while her hand lay in his? She scarcely looked at him, and did not speak unless to answer.

"Would you care to look at some of the pictures?" he asked, as Guarda called North to examine a peculiar chess set on the cabinet at the far end of the room.

"If you please." She felt anything would be better than sitting silent beside him, fancying he might hear the beating of her heart.

She rose and he offered his arm which she declined with a gesture. He looked at her a second and then led her past all the others on the wall, giving them no

glance, until he came to a little curtained alcove. Beyond it was his sleeping-room.

The amber curtains were drawn back from the windows letting in the warm light. On the wall of this sheltered nook hung but one picture.

She looked up at it. Ah ! if she had only the right to be glad and tell him so ! but she dared not. She only said, slowly :

"You remembered so well ?"

"And you ?"

She looked at him and tried to speak calmly.

"I remembered always your kind words. I never forgot what you told me to make my life. If I have failed it has never been because I have forgotten the snow-drops," and she tried to smile as she said it, "but because, because fate has been too strong for me."

Her voice was trembling in spite of herself. He looked at her with burning eyes.

"Merze," he began.

"Hush," she said, putting out her hand pleadingly, "we must not speak of this again. The dead past is best in its grave. I only wanted you to know, if I have missed the way, if I have lost the highest strains in life's music, believe me when I tell you it is not a careless loss—it is I who suffer—who will suffer—most."

She was clasping and unclasping her hands nervously. He took them in both his own and held them.

"Don't," he said, gently. "I do not know what I have said to touch you like this. Come here to the window where Guarda and North can not see you ; sit here. Do not talk, you are too nervous."

She sat in the chair he placed for her so the others could not see her face.

"There, that is better," he said, as she leaned back and closed her eyes, "rest, and let me talk. You are unhappy, you suffer. I can see now how much your bravado was meant to hide. Let me help you, the load may be lighter if two carry it."

"Hush, hush! No one could help me. It is my own I only ask you not to judge me harshly again, but I myself can have no friend such as you would be. My life must be alone."

"But, Merze——"

"You must not even call me that," she said, rising.

"You did not resent another man's calling you so last night!"

The quick angry words leaped to his lips before he could check them, though he would gladly have recalled them as he saw the strange, hopeless look in her face.

"Was that necessary?" she asked, sadly. "I thank you though; come let us go back."

"One moment!"

"No more. What moments you and I have to give each other have been given here. An eternity of words can not change my life, or your thoughts."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Guarda left her at the door that night.

"I have an engagement," he explained. "Drande would take no excuse. Their club-room is just below here. I am to have supper with him. I am getting dissipated since his return; are you not jealous?"

"Just a little," she answered, holding out her hand. "Good-night; I hope you will pass the time pleasantly."

"I always do with him. There are not many who would seek out and try to make pleasant the hours of an old man, but he, ah ! he is different from most. And to-day I noticed you did as I asked. You talked to him more. It was a pleasure for me to see that."

"Good-night, Massa Mark," she said, rather abruptly, and the old man, thinking only that she did not care to hear his praise of Drande, smiled a little as he clasped her hand, and then moved off down the street toward the club-rooms.

"A pleasure to him," she mused as she sat a little later divested of her street dress, and clothed in a loose, soft wrapper, "a pleasure to him." She leaned back, clasping her hands across her eyes, "and I, I dare not even allow myself to think what it was to me."

Yet in spite of herself these forbidden thoughts crept closer, closer to her heart until the clasped hands dropped nerveless beside her.

"I can not help it, I can not help it," she muttered, half-fiercely, to herself. It was a weakness in herself that she had not submitted to willingly. The sense of duty was strong in her but she knew that the warm smile in one man's eyes, the loving tone in one man's voice, had forever made duty a thing to be struggled for.

"I wonder," she thought, musingly, "if prayers, such as Crista's, would be of use against this?" But the warm thrill of Love's possession told her that it never would, and her heart—only a human heart after all—could not steel itself against the sweetness which the knowledge brought her. She rose impatiently as if to shake off those magical, forbidden bonds.

"This is foolish," she said, clasping and unclasping her hands as she walked back and forth. "Guarda

called me strong. He should see me now! But I must be so, I am a woman, not a young girl, to give way to such madness as this, a madness such as must have touched Crista's mother long ago; and I, I thought of her as weakly wicked! Who knows? She might have striven against it. None should judge save those who have known temptation."

She walked herself tired in endeavoring to escape, in part, those surging thoughts that had so much of pain, so much of sweetness, and so much of shame for her.

"It is folly," she whispered under her breath, though she knew it was dearer than all the sensible things of her life.

"I wonder"—and she dropped again into the chair—"I wonder if people who can coldly analyze their thoughts and actions, and judge themselves dispassionately, are more guilty when they do a wrong than those who conjure up excuses for their guilt and really believe themselves the victim of circumstances as so many do? I can not do that. I can find no excuse for myself, unless it is that of an ill-trained soul. Would one with a training such as Crista's, or that saintly Quakeress, give way to such guilt? for it is that. If he knew all, he would call it so himself."

She did not think about going to bed; she had forgotten everything in her tempestuous arguments against herself, in the philosophies that would have held good in all else, but did not alter one iota this new strange current that was drifting into her life.

When did philosophy ever yet hold its own against love?

She heard the doors below locked and the family disperse for the night. In the kitchen was a little tinkle of

dishes. The servant evidently had a caller and was making him a cup of tea. Later she heard the back door close and the girl ascending the stairs. Still she sat there thinking, thinking until her brain was reeling, and her eyes ached. At last, tired of what seemed a hopeless struggle, she dropped her head back on the chair and slipped into a slumber so profound that hurrying feet, loud cries, and even the opening of her door did not wake her.

Without a crowd was gathered. There were hoarse shouts among firemen who were moving to and fro, working with the might of courage against the flames that were leaping, hissing as they mounted upward.

The family were out, but there was no hope for furniture nor aught but their lives. The house was doomed, and the firemen's energies were turned toward saving the ones adjoining it.

Merze had not locked her door and had not turned up the light. The moon's rays had shone in at her window, and she needed no other light for her thoughts. As the smoke and heat awakened the family, one had gone quickly to her room. The door was opened, and a glance at the bed showed it had no inhabitant. There was no time for surmises; she was not there, that was all. The form sunk in the depths of a chair in the shadowy corner was not noticed.

Guarda, with his friend, on leaving the club-room turned carelessly in the track of hurrying feet until it brought them to where the old man could see the house.

"O God! Merze!" That was all he said, but the other asked no question. It told him all. His face was white as Guarda's as they hurried forward.

"Everybody safe, sir," came the answer to his quick

demand. A long breath of relief came from the old man's breast. He recognized one of the family in the crowd, and made his way through.

"Merze, my child, where is she?"

"She did not come home to-night. Did you not know?"

"She *did* come. I brought her myself. Where is she?"

"I only know she was not in her room, had not been in her bed."

Guarda staggered back blindly. "You hear?" he said, as Drande caught him. "They have not looked. She is dead in there, dead!"

As he spoke a thrill of sickening horror passed over the crowd. Broken ejaculations, that were half prayers, caused them both to raise their eyes, and in one window of the doomed building they saw a woman standing, reaching out her hands to those below.

"*Merze!*" Guarda whispered. One moment she stood there, and then staggered back, leaving the black smoke rolling out through the window.

"She has fallen back in the flames. The floor has given way. God help her!" said a man near them.

Some men were placing a ladder against the wall, up which the flames were leaping from the windows below. When in position the firemen glanced into each other's faces. It was work for a volunteer.

Before a word could be spoken, a tall, dark man from the crowd stepped on the lowest round.

"Give me your coat and a blanket," he said to the one nearest him. "Don't be afraid. I am not a novice. Give plenty of water, and hold yourselves ready."

The next moment horrified eyes watched him gain the

window, stagger back for a moment with the force of heat and smoke, and then disappear in the blackness.

The floor had not given way. He felt over it for her form, thinking she had fallen there, fainting. He called once, but it was no use ; the smoke choked him. In groping he pushed against a door that opened into a room where the air was clearer. His eyes, smarting with the smoke could see but little. A small window gave him a glimpse of sky. He shattered it with one blow, letting in the draught that gave back his breath to him. As he turned away, the white shape of a bed could be seen, and a something across it, to which his hands reached eagerly. She had staggered there, half suffocated, her face buried in a pillow.

He lifted her in his arms to the window, where the air revived her. She opened her eyes to see his own bending close above.

"Is it death?" she whispered.

"If so, it is for us both." And he clasped her closer.

"That is best ; to die so in your arms—for"—and her arm encircling his neck drew his face closer, and her confession needed no more words.

With his kiss on her lips, the head dropped heavier on his arm. She had fainted. One long look he gave the white face in the dim light ; it might be his last. Then enveloping her in the blanket, he lifted her and started with his burden back through the outer room that was now like a furnace. He felt the floor crack and give beneath him. Groping blindly he reached the opposite wall, and felt along it until he came to an opening. A shout from below told him he had reached the window. For the first time he dared open his eyes, and he saw below the sea of eager faces. Helpful hands

took her from his arms, and guided his uncertain steps down the ladder to the ground, where the people surged close around to get a glimpse of him.

Guarda, kneeling beside Merze, looked up, his eyes filled with tears, which he made no attempt to check.

"My friend, my friend!" he said, tremulously. "God bless you! You are safe? You are not injured?"

"I think not. I am all right—I——"

And then he staggered, reeled, and fell as a stag falls when a bullet crashes into his brain.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"And you will not consent?" Her voice sounded hopeless, tired, as she stood there at the window with her clear-cut profile in the range of her husband's vision. He leaned back, lazily admiring its effect against the dark curtain beside her.

"I do not see why I should," he answered, carelessly; "things are well enough as they are. You, as Miss Mignot, are ten times more successful than you would ever have been as Mrs. Lawrence. Let well enough alone, and sit down, please. You make me nervous standing there like a statue, with that 'Christian Advocate' expression on your face."

She did so, clasping her hands closely as she looked at him, and said earnestly:

"I feel now that such a promise of secrecy should never have been exacted from me; it was wrong. You must have known it is best for a woman to bear her husband's name. It—it prevents complications in many ways."

He smiled at the word over which she hesitated.

"Complications? Yes, sometimes ; but you yourself are not a woman to be touched by them. As to the others—let them look to themselves."

Her face flushed and then grew pale again.

"It is not honest ; it is misleading people—"

"Certainly ; that was my idea, to mislead them for your own good. That was in part my idea in asking your promise. Without it you were likely to throw prudence and tact to the winds on the slightest provocation. Such, as for instance, the 'complications' of someone else. Is it—" and he watched her through half closed lids as he spoke—"is it for the sake of your hero of a week back ; are you afraid of his youthful affections becoming engaged? Don't let that worry you ; he has a good constitution. A love affair never causes any man serious trouble if his digestion is all right."

She looked up impatiently, angrily.

"You are in jest," she said, coldly. "I am in earnest, serious. You should be my friend in this. I—I want to do what is right, but you are making it very hard for me. I want, so far as I know how, to be a good woman; to be able to respect myself."

He glanced at her quickly.

"It can not be that you—" he began, and then laughed; "no, of course not. If it were you who were interested you would be glad to keep your husband forever in the background ; any woman would."

She rose to her feet, her face white as with anger.

"I have never deserved that insult. I have tried to do what is best. Will you give me back my promise?"

He looked at her admiringly. He had always admired her most when she "showed temper."

"That is a cool request," he answered, rising and leaning on the back of his chair facing her. "You yourself wished to be released from such an inconvenience as a husband. I was, I think, most obliging in that matter. Now you wish to be known as Mrs. Lawrence; at least to a few special friends, and for some reason I am not quite acquainted with. No, my dear Merze, no. If you wish to be Mrs. Lawrence again there is only one way in which it can be settled."

"And that?" she asked, eagerly.

"Is by taking the husband as well as the title."

She made him no answer, only looked at him.

And he, half angered as he was at the disgust in her face, laughed a little carelessly and sauntered out without further words.

It was three weeks after the fire. Guarda had her taken that night to a hotel near the theatre, a comfortable old-style house, where she was cared for so kindly that she had remained there ever since. Drande had also been taken there, but the next day had asserted himself able to be moved to his own rooms. He had been exhausted by the heat that night when he fell like a dead thing among the people, but that was all; he had escaped the flames miraculously, considering what he had waded through. His face was scorched, but not deeply enough to be scarred. His hands, alone, were badly burned, blackened and crisped by the hot, flying cinders, which he had not felt with her in his arms. He had shielded her so well that not a shaft of the hungry flames had touched the white flesh. His first question when he revived and found Guarda and a doctor beside him was:

"She—?"

"Is safe, has revived, is not even scorched," answered Guarda, thankfully.

"Bring her—let me see."

"Have her come if she can walk in," said the doctor, lowly. "This may be serious ; he may have inhaled that flame ; if so, humor him while you can."

She came in, led by Guarda, and stood, white and silent, beside him. Her hair, unnoticed, had come loose and hung, a bronze, rippling mass, over her shoulders. To the man lying there she seemed the fairest thing his eyes had ever rested on.

"Merze," he whispered, and the name sounded a caress as he breathed it ; and then, lower, so that the movement of the lips and the light in his eyes told her more than the sound, "*Mine!*"

And she could only stand there and look at him with a depth of dumb woe in her eyes. She dared not trust herself to touch even his hands with hers, though all her awakened nature longed to kneel there beside him and kiss the scorched face and white lips. A trembling crept through all the slender form as she stood there, until she raised her hands, clasping them close to her throat as if to silence the long shivering breaths that were growing into sobs.

"I can't stand it," she half whispered, afraid to trust her voice. "Massa Mark, take me away, take me away !"

And poor, blind, gentle Mephisto, keen-eyed in all else, saw in her agitation only a deep remorse for her old manner toward him—a deep gratitude for which no words could be found.

Thrice since that she had seen him, but it was in the presence of Guarda, who insisted that it was only a courtesy she owed him to go and see a man who was

confined to his room, unable to leave it through injuries received for her sake.

But it was martyrdom to see his face brighten at her entrance and then grow questioning and puzzled at her manner, which she tried so hard to make only kind. He could say nothing, for Guarda's ears were there to hear; he could not write, for his hands were still bandaged. But she knew he would soon be able to leave the room, and his eyes showed that his first visit would be to her.

And what could she say? There was no retracting that clasp of arms, that kiss, and the low, heart-freighted words when she thought death had come to them.

There was nothing to do but to tell him the miserable truth—if Lawrence consented—and then ask him to go away. She felt, with a heart that beat between pain and pleasure at the thought, that it was the only way in which he ever would leave her. The thought of his contempt was bitter, but she tried to forget it and do what was right, what would be just.

And after all it had been of no use. Lawrence had refused her permission to tell, or had made it a conditional affair, to which he knew she would never consent. She thought of Guarda; but of what use to confide in him? If he told Drande the truth, might not Lawrence revenge himself on her by claiming her as his wife?

She did not know much about law, but supposed he would have that power if he chose to assert it. But would he? Lately she did not feel sure of him in any way; he had a little more of insolence and bravado in his manner to her. He could not but see that she shrank from all intercourse with him, especially since he had been drinking to any extent, and it nettled him into the desire to

show her that, after all, he could be master if he chose. It was only the brute nature stirred by dissipation until it came uppermost.

She scarcely understood the cause, but at times was filled by a half fear of him. He was stopping at the same hotel. That night Guarda had not stopped to think, in the excitement of the moment had even neglected to mention it to her, and the day after the fire she met him in the hall.

"You—you live here?" she asked.

"I do; was just on my way to pay my respects and congratulate you; it was a narrow escape."

"Yes; I thank you. I am quite recovered from the fright."

"Which means," and he smiled disagreeably, "that my visit is not necessary."

"I think, if you do not mind me saying it, that it is best for us to see as little of each other as possible. If I had known you were here I should not have come."

"Oh! you wouldn't? Look here," and he laid his hand heavily on her shoulder. "Does it ever occur to you that a man may rebel at being treated like an outcast, a leper, scarcely tolerated? I advise you not to get so high-and-mighty, my lady, you and Mark both."

"And I would advise you to remember that we are in a public hall, and also to take your hand from my shoulder," she answered, coldly and contemptuously.

He dropped his hand, and his face, flushed before with drink, now flamed with anger.

"So! my touch is contamination, is it? You are forgetting considerable, it seems to me; and you will, of course, leave the house now, eh? Well, you *shan't do it.*"

She looked up in fear, involuntarily throwing her hand out toward him. He saw it, and said :

"Oh, I shan't trouble you ! only it's well for you to remember who I am, and for the present you remain where you are ; do you heed ? It's only a whim of mine but it is best obeyed."

And then he lounged away and left her there speechless, numb with the dread which his words had brought.

They had not exchanged words after that until the day she had sent for him and asked him to give her leave to speak of her marriage. Guarda had spoken about changing hotels, but she had replied that she was very comfortable and would remain where she was. Of what use, she thought, would it be to trouble him.

She seemed hemmed in on every side. And that day, when Lawrence left her room after telling her his conditions, she sat covering her face with her hands and trying to think of some exit from this horrible labyrinth ; but all to no purpose, except——

And she rose swiftly and walked back and forth to escape the thought that came to her. "He loves me. What else matters ?"

"It would serve him right," she muttered, thinking of Lawrence, "and sometimes, sometimes I believe he half hates me, that it would be a pleasure for him to know that I had done some wrong, if only to place me on a level with that other woman. But he," and the memory of the one voice that made music of her name as he breathed it, came to her ; "he—no, no ; he must never, through any act of mine, lose the right to respect me His best love could not be given to such a woman. A man never forgets a woman's weakness, even though she be strong in all else save her love for him. There would

always be that reproach, and it would kill me to see it in his eyes."

She picked up a book at random from some that Guarda had left for her. She did not notice the title ; it did not matter ; anything would do if it only helped her escape from her own thoughts for a few moments.

Afterward she fancied some occult power must have caused her hand to linger on the one book. All were alike new to her. Why was it blindly, carelessly, chosen, the one whose contents were to affect her life? It was hard to get up an interest in it ; her own thoughts would creep in. But she put them half fiercely aside. She had felt as if she was going mad while walking back and forward there ; her thoughts were commingling, driving her half distracted. In some way she must try to forget for awhile this horrible thing—her marriage which nothing but death could free her from. Death ! She had never hoped or even thought of it before, but why not? He might die ; he was not young. She might yet be freed in that way.

"And," she thought as she turned over the leaves, "I would kill either him or myself before I would ever again live as I did."

It was a French translation she was reading: "A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing." It was not a particularly bright book or one calculated to amuse her, though there were cleverly-drawn characters in it. Glancing carelessly down the page, her eye was arrested by the account of a death by suffocation. A man in a drunken stupor had died so. The only aid to it had been a napkin or cloth saturated with water and placed over his face, pressed closely about the mouth and nostrils. No mark of violence, no sign of drugs, or blackened visage to

greet those who found him in the morning. He had simply slept away. Only a drunken man, a napkin and some water, swift, silent, sure.

Her eyes were fastened on the page with a horrible fascination in it. She lay perfectly still, breathless from the force of a thought that had come to her. Even her lips were white. The blood seemed all driven into her heart, which beat as if bursting. Then with a half scream of terror she flung the book from her and sank trembling and shivering on the floor.

"No, no, no, not that—never that!" she whispered, sobbing as she lay there.

CHAPTER XXX.

A half hour later Guarda and Drande stood together on the steps of the hotel. It was the first time he had been out. His face showed no traces of scars; only the hair and beard were clipped close where the flame had singed it, and one hand was still bound up.

"I think," said Guarda, "that I will have you go up alone, unannounced, and surprise her. I know she is in. Her parlor is the one on the corner up there. After awhile I will come up. You go first. She does not expect you so soon, and it will be a thankful surprise to her."

And so it came that, through the old man's boyish love for a surprise, or a trick, Drande was to see her first, alone. As he passed up the stairs a door in the lower hall opened, and, glancing down, he could see someone standing there watching him. It was Lawrence. The incident annoyed him. Why he scarcely knew, unless it was an antipathy he had always felt toward him. But

the thought that he was so near her dispelled all else that was unpleasant in his mind.

He tapped at the door with a small rattan cane he carried. His hands were not able as yet for such exercise. Merze, lying face downward on the lounge, thought it was a porter with coal, and called, "come in," only moving her position slightly and shading her eyes with her hand. She had not been crying. If she only could she felt it might lift in part that horrible sickening weight which had settled around her heart and made her tremble and start at every sound.

She was glad even the porter had come in, though she did not look at him or speak. But it was a human presence, a something beside the phantoms of her own imagination. She was afraid to be alone any longer. She would tell him to send the housekeeper, chambermaid, anyone. She dropped her hand from her eyes to look up. She caught one glimpse of his face, and the next instant he was kneeling beside her.

"Merze!" and his face was filled with amazement, "you are ill, suffering, and they never told me!"

His arm was about her, his face close to hers. She raised her hands, pushing him a little away, and, placing his face between her palms, held it so, looking at it long, earnestly, and with love as great as the sadness in her eyes.

"Don't," she said quietly as she could, "don't; you must not ever again. We—we made a mistake that night—but—we must not go on making it."

He rose to his feet and looked at her.

"You mean to say"—— he began, but she rose, also, throwing out her hand pleadingly.

"Don't look like that. I—I can't stand everything—

not your anger—but that night I was frightened, nervous. I did not know what I said. Forget it and——"

"Stop," he said, not unkindly, but decidedly, "you are telling me what is not true. You did know what you said, and more, you can not look me in the face and tell me you did not mean it."

She clasped and unclasped her hands as he had seen her do that day in his room when her agitation was so great. Her form was trembling as with suppressed sobs. His voice, with the tone of loving mastery in it, had unnerved her. She raised first her face, then her eyes, to his, "I did not mean——"

But she could say no more. His eyes were smiling down into hers and she sat down, covering her face with her hands. "I can not—I can not—have pity," she said brokenly. It was the first time in all the wretchedness of her life that she had asked it of anyone.

"I have *love*. That covers everything, my Merze, mine. It is you who must be pitiful—to yourself and me."

"I can not, I dare not," she answered, without raising her face toward him. "I can only ask you to go away."

"Merze!" and he came close to her, laying his hand on her head. She sprang from under it and staggered back a little to the table against which she rested one hand for support.

"Now listen," she said, speaking rapidly, decidedly, though she swayed like a reed in the wind, "listen to me. You saw just now that I cared for you. I was weak, nervous through much suffering, else you should not have known it. That night I thought we were to die there or you never should have known. But you must not think, never for one moment, that we can ever be anything to

each other. That is why I try to prevent you saying the things that are useless, that will always be useless."

"Always?"

"Nothing but death can change it."

"Merze, what is it? There is something that prevents you telling me the cause of your altered manner. I did you a service a week ago. There is my hand in testimony. I ask in return that you tell me why you will not give yourself to me when you say that you love me."

He held out his unbandaged hand to her, the shapely, slender, firm hand it had been; the hand of an artist, and now——

She closed her eyes with a long, shivering breath as she looked. There were crisped, drawn, scars over it that were there for life. One finger was distorted where it had been burned to the bone, and its shapely beauty was gone forever.

"Do not think that I mean to remind you of any indebtedness," he continued; "it is not that, I would endure it all over again to see the same light in your eyes for one moment. Only for your own sake, as well as mine, will you not tell me?"

She could only stand there with burning, tearless eyes, and shake her head in answer. At the sight of the hand she longed to kneel and kiss she could not speak.

"Merze, is it some person that is between us?"

She stood silent.

"Is it a lover? someone you met before me?"

"It is no lover," she answered slowly. That at least she felt she could say.

"Then it is some fancied disgrace, some remnant of your old life, of your family; some such a secret as that

of the shooting, of your father's death. My child, that is of the past; whatever it is, it can not change my love. I do not ask to know it. If you have any sorrow to bear, let me help you to forget it, if I can not help you to carry it. Be my wife."

"Don't!" she said, sobbingly, "you are only making it harder for me. I am only trying to do what is right. Even if I could tell you, it would not alter things. I could never be your wife; don't tempt me to bring disgrace on you, on myself, for that is what it would mean if I listened to your love, to your wishes."

"Yet you say you love me."

"You know," she said simply, looking at him. He did know. There was no need of words when she looked in his face. The hopeless width of desolation in her eyes showed him how much this love was to her, though she was trying to steady her hands and push it beyond her reach.

"Then I will wait," he said, smilingly, decidedly. She looked at him questioningly but said nothing.

"Of course I will," he continued. "We care for each other, but you say there is some obstacle in the way of our love or marriage. No obstacle can change our love, dear; that is ours, our own. As to this secret which you say nothing but death can change—well, we will wait for the death of whatever it is, and be friends in the meanwhile. There is nothing to prevent that, is there? And fate will be kind to us, you will see. My darling, mine, do you think I would leave you now, knowing how you care for me? That is too much to expect of any man. You seem now as if you have always belonged to me and I think you have, dear. That night in 'Hesta,' you remember, I looked angry? Well, it seemed even then

that you were giving to those people what should have been only mine. It was selfish ; yes, and unjust, but my thoughts of you had been dreaming, ideal fancies, and then——"

"Oh, hush, hush, *hush!*" she cried, clasping her hands pleadingly, "you *will* not understand, and you are killing me with those words! There can be no friendship between us!—Must I tell you? I—I love you too well ; that is why I ask you to go now while I have strength."

"Merze, my darling——"

"Don't come near me, don't touch me!" she said, half fiercely, "but hear me! Your ideal, you fancied me. Listen ; would your ideal be a woman who was a murderess at heart? That is what I have been here in this room to-day. Ah, I thought that would make you shrink from me!" as he drew back, looking at her in amazement. For one moment he thought she had gone mad. She continued rapidly, fiercely, as if it was a sort of relief to accuse herself of the thing which had filled her with a dread of her own wild soul. "You thought me ill, suffering when you entered. It was only the signs in my face of the struggle I had with my own nature, the nature that prompted me to rid myself of the obstacle that stood between us ; and how? To *kill!* You do not believe me, perhaps, look here," and she moved swiftly across the room where the book still lay—"See! there is the page that told me how to do it ; a cowardly way. That is your ideal as she is, and the thing that tempted me is my love for you. Now do you understand why I ask you to go?"

He stood looking at her in wonder, in horror, in pity. Could this be the woman of whom so many spoke as cold, lacking fire for aught save the Galateas or Hestas?

"My poor child, my poor child!" he said, with a great love, a great compassion in his voice; "you surely need a friend now if ever you did in your life. Come sit here; you are trembling, and your hands are like ice. You are ill that you fancy those things." He led her unresistingly to a chair. All her strength was gone with that wild burst of passionate self-accusation.

"You will despise me now and go?" she asked.

"Why should I despise you for the wild imaginings of an overtaxed mind? No, but I will say no more of love since I see how serious this affair is to you. But you must not accuse yourself of such an intention. No, my Merze, just for the moment the thought may have come to you, but it will not remain. The horror it has been to you shows plainly enough that you would never have done the thing you spoke of."

She had not raised her eyes from the floor after he led her to the sofa and sat beside her. A shame had crept over her for the things she had said in her passion, in the weakness and strength of her love for him.

"I do not know," she said, in answer to his last words, "one never knows themselves until they are tried. The thought coming to me suddenly almost stopped my heart from beating. It has filled me with a sickening dread of myself ever since. Perhaps now, that I have told you, I will not think of it so much. It seems a load off my mind."

"My poor Merze!"

"Don't," she said, raising her hands to her throat as if to quiet some emotion within, "don't speak to me like that, kindly. I am afraid, afraid I will cry. Don't pity me, don't speak, just yet."

He sat silent holding her hand while all her frame

trembled with the force of the sobs she was trying to suppress. Her eyes were looking out through the window seeing nothing but her own hopeless face. The slow tears were falling on their clasped hands. After a little she grew calmer. He sat, his own heart full of a dull ache for her, but saying nothing until she spoke.

"I—I have never been a good woman ; that is good in a religious way. I have read much, but it has taught me in a way to disbelieve the things that give most women their hope and faith. To-day everything seems to have changed. There must be a soul, a thing sent to us from some heaven, a something separate from the flesh ; if not what is that thing which recoils, shuddering, from the thought of evil? One's hand or foot does not recoil. It is a nameless something which has done more to convert me than all the religious books I have ever studied."

He saw that she was trying to think and talk of some subject besides themselves until she would get calmer.

"If you are as honest in your faith when it comes as you have been in your doubt, you will yet have a higher hope than any that has touched your life, my Merze ; and it will come."

"I do not know," she said, wearily, "the wickedness in me, as I have seen it, may forever keep away the pure thoughts and hopes that come to good women. Lying here to-day I wondered if evil was in the blood through generations as other diseases are. If so you must not expect too much that is good of me. I am afraid mine was not tinged with the highest morality and purity to begin with, and I, so far in my life, have added no nobility to it."

"I do not believe it," he answered warmly, "any more

than I believe your own morbid self-accusations. You are a merciless judge of yourself."

"Perhaps because I know myself so well."

"I do not think you do; you imagine yourself weak, in morality and will, simply because you are weak in the faith which most good women have. You should know your own sex before you judge yourself so. Believe me, Merze, you are stronger than most women, and God help to keep you so!"

"I think," she said after a little, "you are giving me a hope and a faith in myself that I never had before. You have helped me much. I must ask you to go away, or not to come where I am, but always, always I will thank you for to-day, for the generosity that gave respect to my weakness."

"Not weakness, but a strength of love such as few women could have conquered from principle, duty, or whatever the thing is that stands between us. But we will not speak of that now. I will leave you before Guarda comes. You are quieter now, but not enough so to talk to others. I shall not be able to leave for several weeks. I will not go without seeing you once at any rate. Surely you will not refuse me, will not refuse us both that much?"

"I would want you to come just once. I would be better, less nervous then. To-day I have had much, more than you know, to contend with, and it has left me half mad I think."

"May I write you? Do not say no," as she shook her head, smiling sadly. "You will need someone to speak to; you have no friend."

"I have Massa Mark. Surely he has been my friend."

"Does he know your trouble?"

"He knows part of it. Not my wicked thoughts of to-day, and not that I—that you——"

"That we love each other," he finished, "well we will not tell him now. But sometime in the future we may be able to, and until then you must let me write you, else you are sure to get low-spirited and morbid. I insist on that."

"Your letters will be welcome," she said at last, "and now——"

"And now I must leave you. Lie down and rest if possible. It seems a shame that you must go to the theatre. Ah, if I only had the power to take you away from it entirely?"

"I doubt if anyone will ever do that. I will try to rest for to-night. What matter if hearts do ache, the public must be amused."

He held out his hand, which she took in both her own, and kissed gently the reddened palm, and scarred fingers.

Then there was one long look into each other's eyes, an earnest "God bless you" from his lips, and they parted.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A wild sense of shame tingled through Merze's veins for days afterwards. She was glad he was so loyal to his word as not to come where she was. How could those two ever meet among others and talk common-places again? He was able to attend to his duties again; this she learned through Guarda, and also that he had been to visit his mother.

Merze wondered much what his mother could be like; noble she must be, and good. Despite their love, the conversations between them had been few, and she knew nothing of his family. When his hand was able to write he had done so, telling her he had been at his home in the country for a few days; "and despite the present, I hope it will sometime be *your* home, too," he had added; and again he wrote: "I have spoken to my mother of you. She does not see or know much of our world, but I know she would love and understand you, and would be able to help you much."

His letters showed so plainly that, though he obeyed her and kept away, he had not altered his determination that their lives should sometime be together; and it was hard to put aside the sweetness which the knowledge brought her.

Guarda felt painfully that some change had come to her that had put an end to the old confidence between them. In her life was the new element, of which he knew nothing, that filled her thoughts to the extinction of all else. It was to him the sadness that age always feels as the youth which it has helped to form grows away, out of the reach of old eyes forever.

She comprehended, in part, the pathos in his face as he watched her at times questioningly. It made her feel false and ungrateful. Yet she could see no gain in telling him. He would sympathize with, but could not help her. He might quarrel with Lawrence, and the latter might revenge himself on her; in no way that she looked could she see a gleam of brightness. The letters from Drande and Crista were her greatest pleasures.

Twice she had gone down to Delaware, on the bay, on Sunday, and returned by Monday night, and with each

visit was strengthened her idea that soon she must endeavor to make a home somewhere, so she and Crista could be together more, for the girl's character, so different from her own, was very charming to her. Outdoor exercise had, in a way, taken from her the fragility so noticeable at first. She had not the still air of the cloister clinging to her garments. Companionship with the other girls had dispelled much of that, but had not detracted from the innate purity of her thoughts; it had rather broadened and strengthened them without loss to their fine nobility. She had much to tell of her Quakeress friend, whom Merze learned was quite an old lady. She willingly gave the required permission for a visit during the winter. It was then October. Merze had never yet enlightened Crista as to the nature of her work. There were so many adverse tides in her life she could not risk another then. And she could not be sure that the girl's mind was free from the shackles with which the church has ever endeavored to bind its adherents—an intolerance of the stage.

It is the old story of Cain and Abel, for those two were brothers in the days of the Greek drama, before men deemed themselves too wise for laughter—one of the greatest of God's gifts.

The new play had been a decided success, and was likely to run through half the season, at least, for which Merze was thankful. Her mind was not fitted for the study requisite to a new part. She played night after night, hearing the people praise her in words that were the music her ambition had longed for. It had been her's but a few short months, and already the emptiness in it sounded hollow in her ears; one voice, one heart, one hand were worth them all?

She had seen his face, at times, across the circle of light, and it ever inspired her to her best work. Some flowers found their way to her hotel—flowers that were never thrown aside, or divided in the green-room, as the others were.

He could not help hearing her discussed among his acquaintances. They all knew the incident of the fire, and some wondered, as Guarda did, that there was no closer friendship between them.

"She might make a sensation among outsiders, if she only cared to humor the public more," remarked North, as a party of them sat together in the club-room after the theatre. "With that face and manner she would be lionized by society, if she had a little more business tact—if she would only unbend."

"You mean if she cared to seek notoriety as a professional beauty, or something of that sort," said Drande. "An artist does not require that." It always annoyed him to hear her spoken of among men.

"Don't they?" queried North, cynically. "Well, they call me one, but no one ever did until I found a patron wealthy enough to make me the fashion. My work was quite as good before, yet no notice was taken of it. To be sure, if you are willing to wait for future generations to determine the value of your work and ring your praises, well and good. But if you want success in your own age, you must cater to it—advertise your name and face in conjunction with a new patent soap or mowing-machine, and your fortune is made."

"Nonsense!" replied Drande, who knew that the man's love of his art was an absorbing passion. "You are preaching now what you would not practice."

"Ah! that is because I am one of the fools who

would have won my success in future ages, if left to myself. But a beautiful woman must win her success while her beauty lasts, and the one who understands her age is the one whose name will be oftenest on people's lips. Now Mignot does not understand it in the least. I do not think she ever will. She lives too much in dreamland, I fancy. There is not enough of human nature in her. She is lovely, charming, but she is an icicle."

"I don't think you know her when you say that." It was an old gentleman of the party who spoke—a writer whose verse is known and loved over a wide land.

"Do you know her any better?" inquired Orlane, who was also there. Drande looked up but said nothing.

"I never spoke to the lady in my life."

"Then how"——began North.

"I know nothing of her personally," replied the old man, "and I have only seen her on the stage, and once at a rehearsal I saw her face when she did not know she was observed. During the intervals when not engaged in rehearsing, I noticed she did not chat as the others about her. No, but she walked alone up and down, up and down, back of the scenes. Now, I have lived many years and noted many natures. That woman, calm-eyed, stately as she is, has somewhere under that colorless surface the animal lying dormant. I should not care to be the person to waken its wrath, for I am not quite sure it would be a harmless one. I never saw anything so quiet and yet so restless—it was a caged hyena."

"What a comparison for a lovely woman!" cried Orlane. "I fear you will find few to accept your idea of her."

"Do not mistake me. It is not my idea of her char-

acter. Her nature is not one-sided. I should imagine her a woman with great reserve force for either good or evil. And because you have seen only the dreamy, ideal side of her nature, you must not attribute to her virtues a negative order. Hers is not a soul that is good only through weakness of passions." And rising, without more words, he picked up his cane and with a quiet nod to the rest made his way out.

"Eccentric and queer he is growing lately," remarked North. "Human nature is his hobby, and there is no knowing where he will ride on it when once started. He evidently likes Mignot, but what an original idea of her nature! I fancy it would surprise even herself if she heard it."

Drande said nothing; the old man's words had made a deep impression on him. He knew that not one in the party laid much weight on them, but thought them the outgrowth of a fanciful imagination, but he himself knew they held much truth. As to the evil, he had known none of that, except her own wild self-accusation. And now this man, an earnest student of Nature's book, had in part corroborated them by discovering in her capabilities for work that would not be harmless.

He wondered if, after all, his love for her had blinded him; if he had thought too lightly of that mad, remorseful outburst that might have had more of a foundation than he imagined.

Disloyal thoughts they may have been to his love, but not unnatural, considering what he remembered, and with the echo of the old man's words in his ears. He was not noticing the conversation about him; he was too deeply buried in his own thoughts until he was aroused by hearing Guarda's name. Evidently the con-

versation had drifted from Merze to him. "Good old Mephisto," remarked one ; "I wonder why he keeps him around?"

"Who?" inquired Drande, rousing himself.

"Lawrence," replied North ; "I heard someway he was a connection of Guarda's ; did you know it?"

"Yes, I knew it. I don't know just what the relationship is, and ignore the subject with Guarda. I do not think he would care to be talked about."

"I should say not," remarked a young man who had sauntered over to the party—a friend of North. "Just now, at any rate, for the sake of his protégée."

"What do you mean?" asked Drande, looking at him angrily.

"Why, I mean the statuesque Mignot, the vestal virgin, otherwise the lady who was known for a short time as Mrs. Lawrence."

"*What?*" Orlane and Drande sprang to their feet with the one word on their lips. Some of the others in the room looked up from their conversations at the anger in their tones. North held out his hand for silence.

"You are attracting attention," he said, quietly, "that will do her no good. Havlin, there must be some explanation of this. The lady mentioned is held in all honor by myself and these gentlemen. There is some mistake in the matter, and you must clear it up."

"I am sorry, deuced sorry——" began the young fellow.

"That is of no use," broke in Drande, white with anger, while a dozen different memories flashed through his brain, and made him half sick with a dread of he knew not what.

Young Havlin looked across, half angered at the tone.

"I will tell what I know," he said coldly. "I do not know Miss Mignot, except by sight, and would have no object in saying anything against her. I saw her first as Mrs. Lawrence over two years ago, in Baltimore. That is my home, you know," he said, turning to North. "She stopped at the hotel for two or three months with this gambler, Lawrence, her husband. They left suddenly, and I have never seen either of them since, until I came up here three days ago on business. I had heard of Mignot, and wanted to see her. At the door of the theatre I saw Lawrence, and on the stage I saw the person I had thought his wife. She is now Merze Mignot. I asked some acquaintances why she did not use her husband's name, and they informed me she was not married. That is all I know about it. There has been no mistake. Her face is not likely to be mistaken. I would take my oath it is the same woman."

The three men sat silent for a moment after he had finished. There was the ring of honesty in his words that none could refute. North spoke first.

"It is a bad business, Havlin, and I believe I can depend on you to be silent about it."

"Certainly I will," he answered. "I wish I had never mentioned it. I have not done so until now, only I heard her spoken of as Guarda's protégée, and hearing you talk of his relationship to Lawrence, I spoke before I thought. I am truly sorry, and I wish you good-night."

None of them made any answer. Each was too busy with his own thoughts, and for some moments there was silence, then North spoke:

"What do you think of it?"

"I think it is a lie!" broke out Orlane, fiercely.

"The boy has not lied intentionally; I am sure of that," answered North. "What do you think, Drande?"

"I?" And he passed his hand over his eyes wearily —the hand scarred in her service—the hand she had kissed. "I am not sure that I have any thoughts for it, unless it be that one should have faith in nothing. It is the only safeguard against deception." And rising, he walked away, leaving the two men alone at the table.

"How bitter he is, and how quick to doubt her," said North, looking after the tall form passing out through the door into the street. "But then he never liked her much."

Orlane's eyes had a curious, pained look in them. The very quietness of his friend's manner had, in a dim way, brought a hint of the truth to his mind.

"Yet he risked his life for her. His is a curious character," he replied. And in his own mind was the thought: "And I fear he will carry to his grave other scars than those on his hands."

CHAPTER XXXII.

The morning broke clear, crisp and cool. The shade trees along the old-fashioned hotel had still a remnant of fluttering maroon-tinged leaves, and among them the birds chattered volubly at the first rays of the sun, as though they had a wealth of June forests to roam through—the birds of the city are thankful for so little.

The low, sweet calls outside her window awoke Merze hours earlier than usual. No one in the house seemed

stirring. It was a delightful morning to sleep, and, half vexed with herself, she endeavored to close her eyes and drift again into forgetfulness. But it was of no use ; her eyes and brain were too wide awake. She lay there trying to think if there was any special work she had to do, but could remember none.

"Strange," she thought, "I feel as one does on waking with the knowledge of a journey to be taken—as if I were wakened to get ready for something."

How many of us are wakened in the same way, as if by the rustle of messengers' wings that tell us to "get ready !"

Finding sleep impossible, she rose and dressed, throwing open the curtains to let in the flood of cheery light. Guarda had half promised to call that morning and take her out to breakfast if it was pleasant.

"I fear I can not wait," she soliloquized. "Massa Mark will be sound asleep for two hours to come."

She saw the postman enter the hotel, and rang for the porter to bring up the mail if there was any for her. There was but one letter. It was from Crista, from the little village in Maryland where she had been for two days with her Quakeress friend, Mrs. Menturn. She found everything charming in the sweet simplicity of this peculiar, quiet people.

"It is all so beautiful, my sister," she wrote. "The house has through it the scent of lavender and sun-dried linen and the peace of the sanctuary. One could not imagine loud, rude words as sounding through its white walls. There lives with Mrs. Menturn, her sister, who is also an old lady, but who has never been married. I can not but watch them all the time, they make such charming pictures in their quaint costumes. I hear

much of her son whom she calls Mortimer, he seems the one theme they never tire talking of. He is very learned and has traveled much. There is a picture of him in the room where I sleep; the eyes seem looking at me always—beautiful eyes like those of the St. John in the chapel at the convent. I said so to them, but I do not think they care to hear the saints spoken of. Why, I do not know; because of their religion, I suppose. They seem fit themselves to be classed among the saints. It seems strange to hear these two old ladies calling each by their girlish names—'Betha' and 'Prue.' The house is close to a brook, and back of it are the mountains, roaming over which they tell me Mortimer passed much of his time when at home. The view of them is grand from my window. I should think he would love them. His face looks like that of the people for whom mountains were made, for whom the sleepy peace of the lowlands would never bring content. Your face, my dear sister, has also seemed to me like that at times, a touch of something that is uncommon—such as Judith of Bethulia or Joan of Arc must have had. This letter will seem very full of gossip and fancies, but you see, my dear Mercy, I have nothing of my own to write about, only impressions of the new life and faces I meet. Stella and Edie go to school this winter, so I shall be more by myself when I go back. Would it be convenient to let me remain here? Mrs. Menturn has said she would be pleased if it could be so. Of course I could make no answer without asking you; but I should like it if you are willing. She hoped to-day that I would not be dull with them, and said I might find them brighter by and by, that they had some worry at present. The sister, Betha, told me of it in part. It

is something about Mr. Mortimer. He is in love with some lady in a world apart from these little grey saints, and it fills them with alarm in some way. A fine lady of the world in this white nest would be like a bird of Paradise in a dove-cote. But I must close. I wish you could be with me this evening. This paper seems so cold to tell my thoughts to ; not like the warmth in your eyes when you listen. If they were here now they would see, away beyond the village, the sunset showing pink on the farthest mountains, and verging into purple on those nearer, until the one closest to us is dark against the cool clear sky, and right above its darkest crag the new moon lies like a crescent shining on the turban of some dark Turk."

Merze finished reading the letter with a feeling of content for the girl's happiness that was so apparent in every line she had written.

" My life is at least of use here," she thought.

It was still early. She sat down at once and answered the letter, expressing her pleasure in the girl's content, leaving her to make her own choice as to the length of her stay, and inclosing money for her expenses.

She had just finished the letter, and as she rose from sealing it her eyes caught sight of a form that was walking backwards and forwards across the narrow park in view of her window. One glance was enough to tell her who it was, and she could see him with every turn in the walk casting his eyes toward her rooms.

She sat down, trembling a little; she could see he was waiting or watching for her. Every trifle filled her with some new dread lately. She was afraid to think what it might mean now.

"I felt as if I was to get ready for something," she thought. "Perhaps, perhaps it has come."

She could not stand the suspense, the uncertainty, but drew back the curtains and stood in the window. "I can see, at least, if it is I whom he wishes to see." She had not to wait. One moment his glance fell on her, the next he had started toward her. She stood watching him until he disappeared in the door. He did not raise his eyes to her once as he passed below. A moment later the clerk brought up his card.

"Send the gentleman up," she answered.

As she heard his quick step outside, she opened the door, not awaiting his knock. He walked in without a word, and closing the door behind him, followed her through the small curtained ante-room into the parlor, and stood looking at her with no smile, no light of greeting in his face. She turned sick at heart as she looked at him.

"What is it?" she half whispered.

"What is that man to you?"

It had come at last! Everything seemed swaying about her, as she met his eyes. He caught her by the arm as she was about to fall, and placed her in a chair.

"Sit there," he said, with a cold fury in his voice, "and speak the truth for once, if you have not forgotten how through much lying."

She opened her lips to speak, but no words came——only a short, sobbing breath.

"Liar," he muttered through his teeth, as he looked at her, "liar always, without words, with every look in your eyes, every tone of your voice, you have learned your trade well!"

"Hush," she said looking up at him. "You must not say such words to me. Have, have you forgotten all, the love, the trust?"

"Dare you mention them to me now?" he broke in fiercely. "The love you used but to practice your art on, the blind trust with which I left you in this room, where you, no doubt, laughed over it to him before an hour had gone by? Vampire, with your white, still face and heart of fire!"

"Hush! You are killing me with these words."

"Killing *you?* Oh no; women such as you, are not killed with words. I ask but little. What is that man to you?"

"Nothing—*now*," she answered low, fearing to tell the truth even to check his wrath. Of what use would it be? He would despise her none the less.

"Nothing—*now*," he repeated, bitterly. "O woman, that can say so at twenty-two! Nothing now, though you are here together; though he brings you to the house from which, years ago, his other mistress was taken to a madhouse! Oh! you did not know that?" as she looked up wildly. "I see the knowledge has power to move you, though you can tell me he is nothing to you now."

"You are wrong when you think of me like that," she said more steadily, though her face was white at the bitterness of his taunts. "He has been my"—— she seemed choking as she looked in his face and tried to say the word, "he is"——

"Her husband!"

It was Guarda who spoke, parting the curtains of the ante-room. They had not heard him knock, but hearing voices he had opened the door and could not help

hearing the bitter words of Drande. He crossed to where Merze sat, and, taking her hand, turned to the other.

"Drande, what does this mean?" his old face puzzled at the scene.

"You had better ask your protégée there, the wife who, for the tricks of her trade, will not use her husband's name ; there are many such. But you, Guarda, I thought above acting as a cloak in such a scheme ; our long friendship might have, at least, exempted me from the list you have blinded."

"Merze, what does it mean?" the old man asked tremulously. At the kindness of his touch she had clasped his hands in hers, bending her face low over it until he could feel her tears. "Merze, try to tell me. Why should you be her judge? I do not understand."

"Do you not?" asked Drande, a bitter coldness in his voice as he looked at her bowed form. "I loved her. Yes, why should I not tell you? She will. And you will know, when I tell you as I do, that it was no trifling affair for the pastime of a few hours. I offered her my name. Oh, yes, she was an honest wife in that she sent me away from her ; but she knew I would come back! She had not in her the honesty, the truth to say 'I am a wife'; and what other reason will keep away a man who loves and who imagines himself loved? I leave you to further conquests, madame. Good morning."

His foot struck against some metallic thing as he passed through the outer room. He stooped and picked it up. It was a steel dagger with a slight, slim blade and a handle of brass in scroll work. He tossed it aside on a small stand, and, opening the door, passed out and into the street. He did not look back or see

the woman kneeling by the window watching him with wet eyes, the old man beside her.

"My child, my child, you care so much?"

She did not answer. Her eyes watched the receding form until it vanished, and then she turned to him, clasping his hands.

"You see, dear," she said brokenly, "I am only a woman. I dared not place my ideal too high for my hands to grasp at it, and, after all, they will be forever left empty."

"And you have borne this alone in silence rather than tell me?" he said, leading her back to a chair and sitting beside her. "That was not right."

"You could not have helped me; no one could," she answered, wearily, and then she told him of the interviews with Lawrence.

"The coward! the coward!" he said, as she told him her reason for remaining at the hotel.

"You see," she said, with a wan, piteous smile on her face, "it would have been of no use. A god could not undo the past. It is fate, I suppose; but oh, Massa Mark, it is such a dreary one!"

And he, poor old "Mephisto"! could only clasp her hands and turn away his eyes not to see the misery in the face he loved so well.

"There must be an end to this secrecy at once," he said decidedly. "I shall tell him this morning that I will keep my promise no longer, if it is to bring injury to you. Your reputation as a woman must not suffer through any false ambition for you as an actress. I shall see that you do not suffer in the estimation of your friends when it is known you have been his wife, and they will believe me."

"But it is too late forever to clear me in *his* eyes. He will think only that we have been forced to it."

"That is yet to be seen ; we owe him too much, you and I, to allow him to continue in such thoughts, my poor friend, my poor child, it is a pity, it is a pity!" He rose and picked up his hat.

"Where are you going now?" she asked.

"First I am going to send you up some breakfast instead of taking you out as I came to do," he answered, "and then I am going in to see Lawrence." He was looking through his pockets as he spoke. "I had a knife for him, an old dagger he had left down at Wright's to be fixed. The clerk gave it to me yesterday. I was sure I had it. Look here, it has cut a hole through my pocket and got lost!"

She rose and went to the door with him, and on the stand she saw the knife glistening.

"Is this it, Massa Mark?" she asked, picking it up.

"Certainly it is, how could it have come there?"

"You must have dropped it, and he, Mr. Drande, picked it up," she answered, handing it to him, little thinking under what circumstances she was to see it again.

She closed the door and went back into her room where she had heard all his words of love, all his bitter scorn. The sun was still shining warmly, the birds were chattering about the windows, but her ears were deaf to their music. She shivered and wondered if she would ever be warm again.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"And you are going to leave us again, Drande?"

"Yes, I have about decided on it."

"It's a shame," grumbled North. "What's the matter with New York; isn't it good enough for you?"

"It would be as much as my life is worth to say 'no' to you, a New Yorker," answered Drande. "Oh, no, it is not that, only I have been knocking about in the wilds so long that I feel scarcely fit for civilization. I can have my finger in our political pudding in Mexico, if I choose to go back, and I think I shall."

"Orlane and I shall miss you mightily."

"Thanks, old fellow, I believe you will. Here comes Orlane now."

He came in with some morning papers in his hand.

"Have you heard the news of the murder?" he asked.

"No, we haven't seen the papers," said North. "Where was it?"

"At the old Mansion Hotel. Fred Lawrence was found dead in his bed this morning."

"Great God!"

It was Drande from whose lips the words fell with an intensity that was startling to his two friends. He noticed their wonder and continued: "Why, this is something terrible. How was it! Who did it?"

"That they can't tell. Everything seems very mysterious from the papers. He was seen go to his room as usual. At three o'clock the night clerk in passing his door, noticed the gas burning brightly, contrary to

his habit. The clerk knocked at the door, receiving no answer. On turning the door knob, the door opened, and on the bed was Lawrence lying square on his back, with a knife or dagger driven to the hilt in his heart."

"Why, this is horrible. Any one suspected?" asked North.

Drande said no more. He felt himself get cold all over at the thoughts that would persist in creeping into his mind. A dagger! He had seen one in her room that morning.

"No; no one in particular," said Orlane, in answer to the last question. "Only it is supposed to be a woman."

"And why?" Drande scarcely knew his own voice, and his lips seemed stiff as he tried to move them.

"Well, some unknown woman inquired of a porter in the morning if he was stopping there. She was told he was, and then she asked if he still had the room with the bay window. The man, thinking she was a person come to inquire about washing or something of that sort, told her he had that room. That ended the conversation, and she went away. In the evening some strange woman was seen in the upper hall, and may have gained access to his room easily, as his door was often unlocked. Whoever it was, the deed was very deliberately done. It is supposed to have been done when he was sleeping. There were two blows. The one must have stained her hands, for there was bloody water in the basin, and some marks on the towel. It was not a case of robbery—a vendetta, probably. People of that ilk make enemies through the ruin of lives they know nothing of."

"But I don't think he has been gambling lately," said North; "at least not heavily."

"No, but things like that keep a long time with some people; and it was only night before last that we heard that other piece of rather startling news in which his name was mixed."

"Don't you think," said Drande, trying to speak carelessly, "that it is best to be cautious about the knowledge the young man gave us? When a case of this sort comes up no one knows where it will stop, and it would be very awkward if, through a little carelessness, her name should be connected with the man now. The public are ever ready to grasp on any news with which the name of an actress is connected. It would be hard on her."

"Certainly," replied North, "we must say nothing."

A sort of chill fell over the further conversation of the three men as they sat there at the breakfast table, and one by one they rose and left the dishes scarcely touched.

At the hotel all was excitement. Detectives were at work asking questions and advancing theories. People stood around the doors asking the latest developments and discussing the affair with a sort of morbid interest; while upstairs in one room lay the cold, still form that twenty-four hours before had been Fred Lawrence, and, in another room, with only a few walls between, was a form as still, almost as cold, the wide open, burning eyes seeming to contain all the life that was in her.

"Dead without a struggle—killed as he slept!"

Those were the words of the clerk as she had heard them that morning. What she replied she never knew, but the man, frightened at her face, advised that she sit down till he could send one of the maids to her.

"No; no one," she managed to say with a gesture of

opposition, "only Mr. Guarda—a relative of his—of the—"

And then she could say no more. She sat in the chair he proffered, and he left her with wonder at the ashy face that was turned toward him, but with eyes that did not see.

"It's only natural she would be frightened at a murder in the house," he remarked down-stairs, "and specially interested in this as he belongs to the theatre, but heaven keep me from telling such news to a woman again. She sat in that chair as if she were paralyzed, and the look in her face—it was a sight to haunt a man."

And so Guarda found her. She did not turn her head. He came close and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Merze," his voice had a tinge of fear as he saw her face. "Merze."

Then she spoke, without looking at him, slowly as with lips that were numb.

"It has come. I wished it and it has come."

"Hush, Merze! You must not think such things. It is not your fault. Don't imagine your wishing it so has hastened such a horror, and I don't think you ever did really wish it, unless it was in a passing fit of despondency. You must rouse yourself."

But she did not answer. She only clasped her hands tighter and sat there, dumb with the force of the remorse that overwhelmed her.

"Merze, my Merze!" and he unclasped the cold hands and held them between his own thin, trembling ones with great gentleness. "Look at me, your old Massa Mark, whose heart breaks to see your misery."

She looked at him with wide, weary eyes.

"Misery," she repeated. "Ah, Massa Mark! it is

only just that it should be so. I thought I knew what the word meant yesterday. But you were right when you said none was equal to that of remorse."

"You must not let yourself feel like that. You must think of other things. There is much to be done; rouse yourself and help me. Anything will be better than to sit here like this, as if you were going mad."

"If I were sure that the mad forget I would pray for it."

"But we do not know it. That is what I want to speak to you of, that mad woman; do you know where she is?"

"Yes; why?"

"There is a woman suspected of this crime."

She looked at him steadily. No personal fear could add in any way to her unhappiness.

"Is it I?" she asked, simply. Her own self-accusing spirit made it seem only a thing to be expected.

"You!" And he stared at her aghast at the thought. "You! Certainly not."

"I did not know," she answered. "Who is it, then?"

"No one in particular, but I have thought it might be the woman who went to the mad-house — that girl's mother."

"Crista's mother! Oh, I hope not. I hope not for Crista's sake." It was the first sign of animation she had shown, and he was thankful, though it was for the girl.

"It is only a conjecture of my own. I only thought if she could have escaped it might be so; but we will speak of that later; there are things concerning you to speak of now."

"Me? Is there anything left to say?" It seemed to her that an end of all things had come.

"There is much. First you must take his name."

"Yes," she said, apathetically. It did not matter.

"I think it is best. In an affair of this sort so much is sifted. They may learn it anyway, and it is best for you to make it public yourself."

"As you please."

"And another thing. If you can, you would best come in there a few moments, at least."

"To see—to see?" And then she broke down, covering her face with her hands as if to keep out some sight of horror.

"Yes, my child; try to be brave. It will not be long. I know it is much to expect of you after what you endured yesterday. No wonder you are so unstrung and nervous to-day."

"Yes, I am very weak, very cowardly even lately," she answered. "Last night—you will scarcely recognize your old Merze in this nervous creature—but last night I feared to be alone, so much so that I had one of the maids bring a cot in and sleep outside my bedroom door. She thought I was not well, but it was only a nervous dread of being alone."

"You have not been so often?"

"Never but once before." She did not tell him when it had been. It was the night after Drande's first visit, the night when her thoughts were haunted by the memory of what her wishes had been for one short, terrible moment in her life.

A policeman stood at the door of the dead man's room.

"No admittance, sir, except to witnesses or members of the press," he said, glancing at the lady on Guarda's arm. "The coroner's there now."

"We are relatives," Guarda answered, and the man silently opened the door for them to enter. The few witnesses about the hotel had been examined, but their testimony did not amount to much except as to who saw him last alive, who found him, etc.

A hush fell over the party as the white-haired old man came in, leading the beautiful woman, whom most of them had seen at some time or other. She wore a crimson house dress of sòftly draped material tied at the waist and throat with silver cords, and above it the face looked like chiseled marble, just as white, so colorless was it; and the eyes, with a world of remorse and horror in them, shone like stars. But for all their wideness she saw none of the faces about her. There were some newspaper people and the jury. The coroner, knowing Guarda, spoke.

"We were about to call you, but the lady had best retire; no outsiders allowed in."

"The lady is Mrs. Lawrence, his wife," answered Guarda, quietly. The other bowed in silence and stepped back, giving way for them to pass on.

The room was a large one, divided in two by heavy curtains that hid the bed. Down its length they walked, an odd couple, and all eyes turned curiously toward them.

"Courage, my child; be brave," he said as they neared the curtain. His hand was raised to push it aside, when some one on the other side drew it back quickly, leaving exposed the bed with its ghastly burden. The shock was so sudden that Merze uttered a low scream, and covered her face with her hands; and a man, watching her from the window, thought:

"One would swear by that surprise that she did not know the bed was there. What an actress!"

"Merze, my child," admonished the old man.

"Oh, Massa Mark, I did not think to see him like this!"

She was trembling convulsively and clung to his arm. With a strong effort she turned her eyes once more to the still face on the bed. There was nothing to show any sign of pain or struggle. The bed clothes were scarcely disturbed, and the face was that of a person sleeping. But on the left breast was a cut in the white linen of his gown, a cut that was stained with blood, and close beside it, driven to the hilt in his bosom, was the dagger that had lain in her room the day before!

"While he slept," she said lowly, with a sick feeling running through her at the thought of how lately she had held that knife in her own hands, and how lately she had thought of—and she turned away dizzily.

"Yes. *While he slept!*"

She raised her head at the voice, and across the bed with its ghastly corpse, she met the eyes that had brought to her all knowledge of life's light. But in their depths, as she looked, there was only the glow of a great contempt, a stern, silent accusation that struck cold to her heart. His gaze was but as the reflection of her own conscience. Her head bent for one instant before him, as if through weight of this added burden.

"It is only justice," her white lips whispered to her own soul.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

The inquest was over, and the verdict was "death at the hands of some person or persons unknown."

Some things in the testimony had been a revelation to many. The actress, Merze Mignot, was his wife; she acknowledged it herself.

"Yes, I am his wife," she had said, distinctly, with the knowledge of those accusing eyes on her. He should see that she dared tell it now.

"Since what time?"

"Over two years ago; I could send for the certificate."

It was brought, and the date determined.

"You have not borne your husband's name?"

"Not since entering the dramatic profession. Mr. Lawrence and myself mutually agreed to separate a short time after our marriage. It was deemed best by him that I should use my maiden name in my theatrical work—a custom common among actresses."

"Was the separation an amicable one?"

"Perfectly so, as Mr. Guarda, his cousin and my friend, could testify, as he was present; and it was through my husband's endeavors that he, Mr. Guarda, was induced to take charge of me and instruct me in dramatic work."

"Was this before or after your separation?"

"It was three weeks after we ceased to live together. He offered in all friendship to aid me in some profession, and I accepted his offer in the same spirit."

"Did you recognize the dagger with which the murder was committed?"

"Yes; I have seen it many times. Mr. Lawrence used it often as a paper-knife, and was used to keeping it lying around carelessly."

"When did you see deceased last alive?"

"Last night, on leaving the theatre."

"Did you speak to him?"

"No; there was a mutual bow of recognition; that was all."

"A lady was seen enter this room last night between eleven and twelve o'clock; was it you?"

"No; I have never entered the room in my life until now."

"At what hour did you retire last night?"

"I can not tell exactly, but about twelve o'clock. The girl who slept in my room might remember better."

"Who was the girl?"

"One of the chambermaids—Mary she is called."

"Does she always sleep there?"

"Only once before. It was a night when I was not well, and feared to sleep alone."

"How long since was it?"

She named the day—it was easily remembered; Drande, hearing it, remembered, too.

"And why did the maid sleep there last night?"

"I was not feeling well, and asked the girl, Mary, to bring a cot and sleep there, which she did."

"Where was the cot placed?"

"In the sittingroom, just outside the bedroom door."

"Did you hear any unusual sounds in the night; anything that could have had a bearing on the crime?"

"Nothing; though I was wakeful all night."

"Did you know of any person's bearing any enmity toward the deceased?"

"No one; I have never heard of anyone's having any ill-feeling toward him."

That was all. She was led from the room by Guarda. Through it all she had been cold, distinct, unconscious, apparently, of the curious eyes about her. One pair, looking at her across the dead body of her husband, had blinded her to all else; and if her head was a trifle higher, her form a little more erect, in turning from the bed, it was with the sense of an emergency to be met for which she must nerve herself.

The girl, Mary, was called and questioned, and testified that she had slept in the room of Miss Merze the night before. She had locked the door herself, and arranged her cot after the lady had retired. It was just twelve when Miss Merze turned out the gas in the bedroom and bade her good-night. She was sure she heard the clock strike. It was six when she awoke; the lady was sleeping, and she dressed quietly not to disturb her. On going down stairs, she heard, for the first time, of the murder. She had heard no noise in the night. She had arranged Mr. Lawrence's room the day before. She had often seen the dagger on the table; thought she had noticed it there yesterday. She had seen no lady enter the room; had never seen Miss Merze do so, was positive.

The maid who had seen the lady was called, and stated:

"Yes; it was after eleven o'clock. I was going upstairs when I saw a lady going into Mr. Lawrence's room. I did not see her face; she was not tall, and had a shawl on her arm, and possibly a bonnet in her hand;

am not sure. She was bare-headed, and walked along the hall as if she knew where she was going; did not knock at the door; am certain ; just turned the knob and walked in as if she was at home. There was no light in the room, I am sure. I do not think Mr. Lawrence had come up. Did not think it very unusual, as guests had often obliged the landlord by changing rooms for one night in case of a crowded house, and I supposed Mr. Lawrence had given his up to some lady."

Then Guarda was called. As to the dead man's matrimonial affairs, he corroborated what Mrs. Lawrence had said. As to the cause of the separation, he was under the impression that it was partially an objection, on her part, to Lawrence's profession, but there had been no ill-feeling regarding it ; he was certain. They had befriended each other since in many ways, and had always been on speaking terms; always courteous when meeting, though they never sought each other's society. Her stopping at the same hotel was explained by the fire. He was the dead man's only near relative, to his knowledge. Had seen him last night at the theatre; had spoken to him there; had not seen him after. He knew the dagger; it was his cousin's; he had brought it home from being repaired the day before; did not know what had been wrong with it; Wright, the jeweler, could tell; he had only carried it home to Lawrence when requested to do so; Lawrence had left it to be repaired himself; did not know of anyone with enmity toward him.

And that was all. It was very unsatisfactory to all, for nothing gave them any clue to the woman who entered his room with a bonnet and shawl in her hand. She had evidently hidden away in some other part of the house, and then secreted herself in his room until he

was asleep. If she was acquainted with the house, as she appeared to the girl to be, it would be an easy matter for her to get out the back way unseen.

It was a mystery, a thing that was food for newspaper people and detectives for many a day. Lawrence was not a man with whom any woman's name had been connected for over ten years. Then his wife had stopped there, so the landlord said in his testimony. But the lady's health was bad; brain trouble. He had taken her away, and she died soon after. So Mr. Lawrence had told him several years later. It was one of the many cases in the criminal calendar that seemed to defy all efforts to unravel. The strange woman had disappeared as if into the earth.

The name of Merze Mignot, connected with the mystery, only served to give her more interest in the eyes of the public. It had brought her in part the notoriety which North had advocated. There was something strange, romantic in her life; such a peculiar friendship to exist between herself and her husband, whom no one would have guessed was her husband. Everyone remembered thinking there was some reason for that strange reserve of hers. She had had no confidant of her own sex to whom a word had ever been whispered; in fact, she had never seemed to care for lady friends beyond the civilities of passing acquaintanceship with them. That in itself was enough to sharpen many a busy tongue as her name was discussed. But try as they would, they could say nothing really against her. The fact of Mary's sleeping at her door that night was all that saved her from suspicions—that and the strange woman; and in her own heart she knew that even these did not clear her in the eyes of that one man. Neither

Guarda nor herself noticed that she had not been asked when she saw that dagger last. She had omitted telling or mentioning its presence in her room; she had not thought of it, but he, listening, had noticed the omission, and, in the face of what he knew, it was hard to believe that it was unintentional. He knew Guarda's love for her, and only thought: "He is her dupe; he would do anything if it were to shield her. What man would not, if she but smiled on him and asked him? Even I, fool that I am, find her face haunting every hour of my life still."

Only to each other had Merze and Guarda mentioned the only woman they could have suspected, and that first day she had said:

"I do not wish anyone else to be wronged, but so long as no one is suspected, of what use would it be to offer our theory? It would only bring trouble to Crista, perhaps. We will investigate ourselves first and then decide."

"Do you know where she is?"

"Yes; he gave me all the papers that he possessed concerning both Crista and her mother. Do you know, Massa Mark," she said, meditatively, "I think he had a sort of presentiment of something like this, else why should he have given these to me together with Crista's certificate of birth? He asked me to take them all. There are the receipted bills of years. The last one was made out four months ago for six months in advance; here it is."

Guarda took the bit of paper and read a receipt from Dr. E. G. Etkens, of Hazelwood, N. Y., to Mr. Frederic Lawrence, for total expenses of Mrs. Effie Loring, up to date of January 1, 18——

He read it over carefully. "So!" he said, at last, "he has her there under her own name. Well, that is best; but I thought she was known as Mrs. Lawrence. Write at once and make inquiries about her. If she is there, all right; I shall be as much at sea as the rest."

She wrote the letter, and also one to Crista, telling the girl to address her in future as Mrs. Lawrence, that she was married. "I will write more particulars in another letter," she added; "I have much trouble at present, but am sure you will be patient until I have time to write or to see you. I am your sole guardian now, and shall hope to make your life a pleasant one. Write me often, and if you can, pray for me, your sister."

She was thankful that she had the girl to think of. It was the only thought that seemed to rouse her from the depths of her own accusing conscience.

"I can at least do what I can of the things he would wish done for her, if that will be any atonement," but she felt that nothing could ever be that.

She did not go to the funeral. "Don't ask me to do that, Massa Mark," she said. "I have tried to be strong through so much, but that, that I could not stand. I am not sure enough of myself, and if I should break down now, I do not know where it would end. Let me be while I am still sane. I can stand no more."

And though the words were spoken calmly, he felt that she was speaking the truth. If she had only been a little less calm, he would have felt less fear for her. Since the morning of the murder, she had seemed like an automaton. After that one shriek, when the curtain was drawn aside, she had shown no agitation over anything. When advised by Guarda to change her hotel, she answered quietly that she was content where she

was, and no arguments had succeeded in changing her. The friends and acquaintances with offered sympathies found it hard to express them to the woman with somber eyes that never softened, and who thanked them with cold lips that held no tremor in them. She was always gracious, in a still, cold way, that had little of humanity in it.

All business details Guarda found her ready at all times to attend to. Since that first night, she had never missed one at the theatre, and then she told Guarda to put on one of the other ladies in her stead.

"No, I am not ill," she had said, clearly, distinctly, when he offered to remain or to send someone to her. "I thank you, but I am quite well. I am not at all nervous, only I know how much I can stand better than any physician could tell me, and to-night I know that I must be alone. Don't be afraid, dear," she added, with a kindly glance at the troubled old face. "I shall be all right. I shall live, if that is what you are thinking of. Come in the morning. I shall be more able to talk then. To-night I must be alone."

And in the morning he found her calm and collected, as she had been ever since. He told her that Drande had left the city without even coming to bid him a good-by. He was sorry. He had hoped to see him and clear her in his eyes of intentional deception. But he had left no address with his friends, and no one seemed to know where he had gone.

She listened and shook her head. "Never mind, Massa Mark. If you do see him, I would prefer that you would not mention my name. It will do no good. That is of the past; let it go."

"The letter from Dr. Etkens came when Guarda was

with her. She glanced at it and handed it to him without a word. It read:

"MRS. FRED. LAWRENCE: I should have written your husband three days ago, but had not his address. The patient you inquire for, Mrs. Loring, died this morning. The morning of November 4th she in some way escaped the vigilance of the keepers, and was not found until the sixth. She had evidently been wandering out through the country, and was returning at night over a foot-bridge that crosses a ravine near the village. She must have missed her footing and fallen, for she was found early yesterday fatally injured. She could give no account of her wanderings, and seemed sane at the last. A ring which she has always worn was missing from her finger. I learn that she sold it to a jeweler in the village, who never doubted her sanity. What she did with the money I do not know. Any investigation of the affair which yourself or her friends desire to make will be welcome. I await your arrival, or orders as to disposition of body.

"Yours truly,

"E. G. ETKENS."

Guarda read the letter in silence, and, dropping it, nodded his head slowly as he looked at her.

"The morning of the 4th, and it was that night he was found dead."

"But how could she get here; how could she know where to find him?" asked Merze.

"The little village is at the junction of several roads. She had money; was of sane appearance. It is easy to get a train from there to New York any hour of the day. As to knowing he was here, it was from this house he took her there. It was only natural, if she had any ideas of revenge against him, that she should come here

first. She learned that he was stopping here. After hiding through the day, she walked into his room at night, like a person at home ; why not ? That room had been her home last outside of the asylum. As to her escaping unseen, that is something I can not explain, but she must have been very cunning, but the case is not unprecedented, and to me it solves the secret of the murder."

"And it is Crista's mother," said Merze, slowly. "She thought her dead years ago. She knows nothing of her disgrace, but if this is ever discovered, she may be dragged into a knowledge of all the terrible truth. Ah, Massa Mark, that must not be ! Of what use is it to anyone ? They are both dead ; let the whole affair die with them. It is not as if it were doing a wrong to anyone. No person is accused. Why need we tell what we only suspect ?"

"It may save trouble in the future, Merze."

"How can it ? If you choose you can yourself collect any evidence against her that can be secured quietly, and, if it is ever needed, bring it forward. It is not needed now. Let it rest as it is, for—Crista's sake."

The old man looked at her lovingly.

"For Crista's sake," he repeated. "Merze, do you never in this world intend to do aught for your own sake ?"

She rose and walked over to him, taking his hand in hers and kneeling beside him as of old.

"Massa Mark," she said, quietly, "let things be my way now. I have wished, for my own sake, thoughts you do not dream of. Their fulfillment has brought a terrible retribution. Let me do what I can to make amends. Let me help to keep at least one soul in the happiness of innocence."

"Ignorance you mean."

"Ah, well, perhaps. So long as it is happiness, what does it matter? I should be thankful for either. But they are gone out of the reach of my hands forever."

CHAPTER XXXV.

"And thee is content in this quiet place with us, Crista?"

It was a soft, sweet-toned voice that spoke, a voice that suited well the character the girl had described to Merze.

"I am very happy," laying down the book from which she had been reading aloud, and looking lovingly at the soft-voiced little lady. "I know of nothing that would make me more so unless it would be to see my sister Mercy."

"The time seems so long when you are apart?"

"I have been with her so little that I feel as if I scarcely know her, but now that she is married it may be different; every letter I hope will bring news that she will come soon. It is more than two months since I saw her."

"Well, well, perhaps the next mail will bring the news thee wishes. It is now the mail carrier's hour. Would thee care to go thyself to the village for it, or shall I send with Friend Liston as he passes?"

"No, no, said the girl, rising eagerly, "let me go; the day is so lovely I shall like the walk."

"And I fear thee has tired thyself with the faithful morning's reading thee has done," said another voice

that of Betha, who was knitting quietly in the corner, a little dove-colored duplicate of her widowed sister.

"Indeed I have not, Mistress Betha," said the girl, gaily. "It was a pleasure to read to you both; it always is, and when I return I shall finish it."

And so saying she donned a jacket, a woolen cap and mittens, and started for the walk to the village, a half mile away.

The eyes of the two little ladies in white kerchiefs and aprons looked after her fondly.

"She is a great comfort, Betha."

"A great comfort, Prue."

"We shall miss her much when she goes from us."

"Very much, Prue."

Mistress Betha's conversations were usually an echo of her sister's, to whom she deferred in all things, Prue being two years the senior, and both were over sixty.

"She has been with us six weeks," resumed Mrs. Menturn; "I wonder much that she is left so to herself."

"So do I, Prue."

"But her sister, though fond, is of the world, worldly; that accounts for much," added the little lady, to whom the world, outside their little homestead and its surrounding hills, was a whirlpool in whose dizzy evolutions there was time for no rest, peace or memory.

"Yes; that accounts for much, Prue."

"For a man it may be well in a way, but for a woman! I hope, Betha, this young creature may never have to enter it."

"I would pray for it too, Prue."

"Even the convent would be better."

"Much better."

"If we could only hope to keep her here, Betha."

"Ah, if we only could, Prue."

"It is strange we have had no letter from Mortimer lately."

"Very strange, Prue."

"I fear he was unhappy when he wrote last; his letter was so very short, and he could not tell me in it where he was going. I fear much, Betha, that it concerns the lady of whom he spoke when at home, whom he hoped some time to bring to us."

"Very likely, Prue."

"She seemed to be very much to him, though there was some obstacle at the time to their marriage. He was very much in earnest, the same nature as his father. You remember, Betha?"

"I remember very well, Prue."

"Yes; the same earnest nature, only he is older than his father was when——"

And then the soft voice died away, and the soft brown eyes gazed out across the meadows where the snow lay in white patches, across the fields where she and the husband of her youth had walked hand in hand through many a gloaming, and a silence fell over the two broken only by the click, click of Betha's steel needles.

Down along the country lane walked Crista, glad to be out in the cool air that brought a pink tinge to the smooth oval cheeks. Happy she was as she could ever be out of reach of her church; there was none in the village of her faith, and this was the only drawback to her content, this and her separation from "Mercy," as she always called her. She had said but little of her sister's interest in her to her new-found friends; she was very loyal, and understood without words that as Merze

had told her but little, it must be because there was some good reason for not confiding her affairs to her. In one or two letters she had spoken as if in the spring they were to have a home somewhere together; for her to be patient until she could tell her more. And Crista had asked no questions, and to Mrs. Menturn had only said: "My sister is married; she is Mrs. Lawrence now," and that was all. And from her two old friends no queries came. Her sister they supposed was a fashionable lady who had not time for the care of a young girl; that was all they thought, and Crista's own pure nature needed no words of recommendation or weight of family name to make her loved by them.

So she had lived content, knowing nothing of the storms in the heart and life of the sister whose name was always first in her prayers. And, walking down the village street, she wished earnestly that there would be a letter from her. There was, and at a glance she hurried out to gain the road and read it on her way home. Turning the corner of the street, and opening the letter as she went, she walked almost into the arms of a tall gentleman coming from the opposite direction. There was a moment of flushed embarrassment on her part, an earnest "pardon me" on his, and as he stepped aside she glanced at him, and then stood still, forgetting to go on, forgetting where she was for one moment as she looked into his eyes. And then his curious, searching glance recalled her, and she felt herself grow warmer all over as she murmured, "I did not mean—I beg your pardon—I——"

And then she passed swiftly on, tingling with a feeling of shame for the seeming rudeness. His eyes had seemed so familiar, yet she could not recall where she

had ever met him. For one moment she had felt like holding out her hand as to an acquaintance.

And he stood looking after her with a little amused smile on his face. "A strange adventure," he thought. "If any eyes ever showed recognition, hers did, yet I am certain I have never seen that perfect face before. It is not one to forget easily, a face for Iphigenia or Elaine, with all its childish purity untarnished."

But close between himself and the fair face he had passed came another, the face of a woman with hair of a bronze glint and eyes somber, wide and tearless—eyes that, despite his judgment of her, haunted every hour of his life.

Crista walked on, wondering a little who the gentleman could be; no one she knew, she was certain of that, for she had never known one except Mr. Lawrence in her life. But she soon forgot him in reading the letter she had received, which she did, walking slowly along the country lane, not noticing that the subject of her speculations had followed her part of the way and then crossed into a field. But he could see her, and thought, "Ah! that explains her blindness—a love letter, and her haste to read it caused in part that very becoming blush."

But it was not a love letter, and it was a little disappointment to the girl who read it.

"My Dearest Crista: I fear you will think I keep my promises badly in not coming to see you, but we must content ourselves with letters a little longer. I leave New York to-morrow for Chicago, and shall not be able to return for several weeks, as I shall be traveling part of the time. I send you an address in New York to which you can always write, and the letters will be forwarded to me.

"My dear, I feel that there are many things over which you must be puzzled, and which I can not tell you by letter; but when I come back I hope to be able to set your mind at rest in many ways. Believe me always when I say that my first thoughts are for your happiness. Write me often, tell me of your life and your friends. Nothing you write can be without interest to me. My letters to you can never be interesting, for you know so little of my life and work; but they will always bear my dearest love to you from your sister.

"MERCY."

The slow tears crept to her eyes as she read. She had not realized how great her hope had been until the letter destroyed it. And now it would be weeks before she could hope to see her. It was very hard, a great disappointment. Small wonder the tears filled her eyes and blurred all the winter landscape in a white mist.

Away in the West, in the fair city by the lake, a woman, careless of the fatigue of the journey, careless of all about her, sat with hands clasped back of her head, and with eyes wide, dry and desolate, gazed out unseeing over the heads of passing crowds beneath her window.

"If I could only be once more as other women are," she thought; "women whose tears are not burned out by the sense of their own guilt. Those who can weep should be thankful, but I—I feel that from me the boon will always be withheld.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

As Crista stepped on the long white porch the murmur of voices met her ears—a man's voice, deep and mellow, and Prue and Betha, unusual as it seemed, were both talking at once. She opened the door, wondering much at the evident flutter in Betha's manner as she met her.

"There is a joyful surprise given to us, and thee will, I know, have a share in our pleasure when I tell thee our boy, our Mortimer, has come home."

"I am indeed pleased to hear it," answered the girl, earnestly, and then she turned half shyly and asked, "Am I presentable, Betha, and are my eyes red? Yes, I was crying, just a little. I was so very much disappointed. My letter came, but my sister can not come, not for many weeks, and I was so silly as to cry."

"Dear, loving heart," and Betha's kindly hand patted her cheek. "I have no light that tells me how kindred can wander away from thee. But always here in our home thee will be a welcome guest."

She took the girl by the hand and led her into the room where mother and son sat with clasped hands, and tears of joy shone in the little lady's brown eyes. She rose and came forward as the girl entered.

"Mortimer"—how the soft voice lingered on the syllables! "My son, this is my friend, Crista Loring."

He rose and held his hand out to her, and as she raised her eyes she met again those of the gentleman

on the street corner. She saw at once where the likeness lay. It was the face she had gazed at on the wall of her room every day since she had been there.

"Oh, it is *you!*" she said, flushing a little under his surprised glance.

"I am very happy to say it is," he answered, amused at her greeting. "Had I known you were the 'friend Crista' of my mother's letters, I should have waited and walked home with you.'

The two old ladies looked puzzled.

"Why, Mortimer," said his mother, "did thee meet with Crista in the village?"

He was about to answer, the smile still in his eyes at the remembrance, when Crista spoke instead:

"Yes, friend Prue" (of late she had, with their wish, fallen into their habit of addressing each other). "Yes, we did meet, and I was so clumsy, with my letter in my hand, I forgot all else, and did not notice where I was going, and I—I nearly fell over Mr. Mortimer, and then to make it worse I stood there stupidly and stared at him. You know the picture in my room? Well, it was so like his face that I felt it must be someone I had known. I felt for one moment as if I should put out my hand and speak; and then I felt so confused I scarcely remember what I said, and I know he thought me very stupid."

"Did I?" and he glanced laughingly at his mother and Betha. The girl seemed so anxious to give her excuse for staring at a stranger, and she was so lovely a picture with her yellow hair a little tossed by the wind, and her cheeks aflame, standing there as if before her judge. "Did I? I did not remember having thought so. I felt much honored, I assure you."

But the quizzical smile confused her, and she said no more, but sat close to Betha, whose knitting-needles were again clicking in the corner by the open fire-place. The manufacture of gray woolen socks was to her as the web of fate; sorrow and joy might chase each other over the lives about her, but they never checked Betha's knitting long at a time.

Surely the scene about the hearthstone was a restful one to the world-weary man who sat there. The furnishing of the room was simple, but very comfortable, the occupants allowing themselves many of the little luxuries unusual among professed Friends. They had worldly goods in abundance; they could well afford them, and neither Betha nor Prue was so strict as many of their sect. Mortimer's father had been of the world, and dying left his son both his wealth and tastes. And though there had been a marriage later with Menturn, it had never altogether eradicated from Prue's mind the effects of the luxuries with which her young husband had tried to surround her. And though her life could be content only within sight of their own meeting-house, and though all the wealth could not have weaned her away from the white farm-house out into the world, yet she had not the narrowed prejudices that so often belong to their kind, and through her son many rare and curious aids to comfort and pleasure found their way into the Quaker household—many that were held as an abomination before the Lord, and akin to the workings of Satan, to the little village that, with a few exceptions, was bound under the rules of the Friends, whose traditions condemned all arts that were alone for beauty or ease.

Over the floor, that was of narrow strips of dark and

light wood alternating, were laid large rugs of oriental appearance, whose bright colors had been woven in by black-eyed women and children on the shores of the Mexic Gulf. Some easy chairs of dark wood were scattered about, and over a straight-backed "settee" were thrown a couple of fur robes that softened its grimness and made it quite inviting; curtains of home-made linen were at the quaint, deep windows, and through them the sun filtered and fell across the fair hair of the girl as she sat beside Betha listening to the conversation going on, but saying nothing. She looked like a softly-tinted blush rose between two sober little pansies; so thought the man as his eyes rested on the delicate features, with a sense of pleasure at finding her there.

"And thee has come to stay a long time, surely?" asked the mother.

"Surely," he said, smiling down on her. "I may not be much company, for I have come home to work, to work very hard."

"I fear thee is doing too much work," she said, chidingly; "thy face does not show the health it did; it is paler, with a tired look. Thee must remain with us and rest."

"After a while, after a while," he said. "But now I have writing to do, work that is to be done at a certain time. I have tried to do it lately, but it is of no use; as you say, I have not been very well. I traveled, but I could work nowhere, so I am come home. Here, if anywhere, a man should have content, and if you will keep me I shall remain two months."

"It will be a great gladness to us," said his mother, with earnestness, and then resting her hand on the bright head before her added: "The Lord has granted us many blessings of late."

"Great blessings, Prue," echoed Betha.

And then the two housewives flitted out to interview their one assistant, Huldah, regarding the most toothsome articles for the dinner table.

And Crista, with a half feeling of shyness, was left alone with the face that was so like the one she had admired and dreamed over. Yet it was older by many years than when the picture was painted, older and sadder. But the eyes were still the eyes of the saint in the convent chapel. She wondered, looking at him, if he also did not care to hear the saints mentioned.

She had no girlish ideal of manhood in her fancies, and if she had had, it would never have been filled by this man, who seemed old to her, though Prue and Betha had always spoken of him as the "boy." But there was a fanciful vein of romance in her nature that had in a way been nurtured instead of checked by the forms of church; warm, attractive forms they were to her, with just enough of mysticism to fill her mind with dreamy fancies that seized on whatever came nearest and threw over it the glamour of her own imaginings. Of the still nuns in the convent she had woven many a romance of which the subjects were ignorant, and here, in this quiet dovecote, as she called it, was something real, tangible—a pictured face that was of the world apart from her own, a face that she heard had a story of love, perhaps of romance. There was no marriage. He had come home as if tired of the world, and his face when in repose was sad. She noticed the difference when his mother left the room and his smiles were not needed to make her think him cheerful. And this youthful student of human nature felt a great pity for him, seeing his eyes close wearily as he

sat in the glow of the blazing logs on the hearthstone and she could see he had forgotten her presence.

She rose to her feet quietly and stood there, a slim, slight figure in a brown dress as plain as Betha's own. She seemed so in harmony with the quiet peace of the scene; and, as she made a slight movement to withdraw, the man opened his eyes and looked at her in admiration. She seemed to him a beautiful picture of youth and simplicity—that was all.

"Are you also going?" he asked, languidly, with a little note of protest in his voice. She was so lovely a thing to look at, with the delicate tinting of her face and the soft curves of her girlish figure. He tried to remember what it was his mother had written of her young friend, destined for a nun, he believed in a vague way. It was a pity, and yet——

"Am I to be left alone?" he repeated.

"I thought I might disturb you by being here, that is all," she answered. "You looked tired, as if you needed rest."

"Yes, child, yes; I am tired. But here perhaps there may be rest." The last portion of the speech was more to himself than to her, but she heard, and it drew nearer to him her sympathies, and diminished the shyness she had felt at first in speaking to a man of the world, and of his years. She still stood leaning with one hand against the high mantel, and spoke a little timidly:

"If—if it is your life that is tired of the world, surely here would most peace be found."

He raised his head and looked at her a little astonished. The words were spoken with the grave sweetness of age that comprehends the needs of humanity. Yet he was old enough to be her father, and she was

only a slim bit of a girl, with the open, trustful eyes of an infant.

"My child," he said, looking at her more intently, "I have just come from a long journey; what gave you the idea that it was the world of which I was tired?"

She was a little confused at the question, but she had the fearlessness of an earnest, sympathetic nature.

"I could see your eyes close as a woman's would if —if they were heavy with tears instead of fatigue. I do not know much of men. I have never known any well, but I could not help feeling that it was a rest of the heart, the soul, or the mind, you needed, not that of the body. Perhaps," she added, gently, "you may think this a rudeness, an impertinence, but indeed I do not mean it so."

"No," he answered, quietly, leaning his forehead against his hand for a moment; "no, child, I think of your words nothing that is not noble and good. Your sympathy should be very sweet, very helpful, to any who are in trouble. Let us hope that my own may grow lighter under the grace of kindness and the peace of home."

"Ah! it will surely do so here," she answered quickly. "I can not imagine any great unhappiness—like the unhappiness of tragedies, I mean—beneath this roof. One feels always in a sanctuary here. It is like entering the chapel early in the morning before the sun is bright enough to dazzle through the tinted glass. And your mother and Betha, at first I scarcely took my eyes off of them, they made such charming pictures in their soft tints and sweet faces, symphonies in gray and white."

He smiled at her earnestness. She always spoke rapidly, and her eyes lit up wonderfully when much inter-

ested. He scarcely knew which was the more to be admired, that or her silence when she had stood perfectly still with the cool repose such as rested one to look at.

"You are fond of my mother?"

"That does not express it," she returned, with a rare, warm smile in her blue eyes. "We are great friends, I am thankful to say."

"I hope your friendship will extend to the rest of her family."

"To you?" and she turned her face up with a little, bird-like movement. "That will not be hard; I know you quite well already."

"Oh, you do?"

"Very well, indeed," she repeated, "through your picture. It is in my room where I see it first on waking in the morning. I liked it from the first because it had eyes so like a head of St. John that hangs in our chapel. But perhaps you do not like to hear the saints spoken of?"

He laughed at the frankness of her words. He could see so clearly that she was as little suited to the outside world as was his mother or the dark-robed nuns.

"Why should I not like it?" he asked. "Certainly I do. I never was compared to one before, and it is a novel sensation, but if I remain two months with my mother and you, I shall no doubt be quite saintly by the end of that time. What will you make of me, a parish priest or a solemn-faced speaker among the Friends?"

At this they both laughed, and from that time there was no return to formalities between them. Her childish wisdom, that was childish only in its innocence, was very charming to him, doubly so in comparison with the

wickedness of one woman in whose life he had hoped most to find truth, and who, in spite of his distrust, kept her image in his heart—the image that he knew no fairer face, no purer soul could ever supplant.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

To Merze, across the varied beauty of the Alleghenies, across the level width of midlands, was borne the girl's letter telling of her new friend.

"It is now two weeks since he came, and already all seems so changed. He works, writing all day, but in the evenings he puts away the piles of manuscripts and books, and then he talks to us, telling of so many strange customs and religions among the people of our Far West; the people whose temples still stand though they themselves have vanished like those of Etruria. He has seen so much and remembers so well. And to listen is like hearing repeated tales like those the monk Froissart loved to garner. He tells them so well, and only when doing so does one detect a tinge of the Quaker in him that has come through his mother. His tones at times drop into the light, chanting rythm, such as the Friends use in their meetings. I have been to meeting once with Betha, but their ceremonies are not attractive after the beauty of our own. Friend Mortimer —they have all requested that I address them in their own simple forms, goes, I think, to all churches. He speaks to me often of my life in the convent, and seems to think it is a beautiful one to live. You know I wrote to you of some lady whom he loved; well, I think he is unhappy

because of her, that she does not love him, for Betha says he speaks no more of her to Friend Prue, and when she herself mentioned it, he only said: 'It is over; let it rest, and down here with you and my work I will forget.'

"But I am sure he does not forget. We talk much to each other, and I think he is glad to do so, often that he may get away from his own thoughts. I am pleased to know that it is so. In looking at his picture I had fancied all sorts of romances about him and the lady, whom I feel sure is beautiful. And now if he has come home and will forget all about her, he will not suit one of the stories I had imagined of him.

"He is very kind to me, as they all are. Yesterday I entered the room where he writes. His face was covered with his hands and he did not see me until I spoke. I asked if he was troubled, if I could help him. He looked at me kindly, and said: 'Child, if there is any balm among humanity for hearts that are world-weary, it must be held in the pure palms of hands like yours. You do help me, have helped me much.'

"I repeat his words. His language is to me always beautiful. I wish you could know him. I think you would like him. When I said the same to him he asked: 'Is this sister Mercy of yours like you?' and when I tried to tell him how much more grand and beautiful and good you are, he stopped me. 'There,' he said, 'no more. She is a grand lady of the world, no doubt, and some day she will come in state and carry you away out of our sight. That vision of the future is sure to make me detest her on principle. I will hear no more of this paragon whom you add to the list of your saints, and worship.' It was only in jest, for I know he would admire you much. But when I try to talk of you he will say:

'Speak to me of yourself, child; let us forget there is a world outside.'

"I see I am filling my letter entirely with him; but he fills so much of our lives here that I can not help speaking of him. His mother and Betha are spoiling him, so he says. And I, from the first day, I have been sorry for him because I see often that he is troubled. I have never seen trouble myself; all my life has been so still and peaceful, and to see others unhappy, hurts me.

"I have many letters from the convent. They seem to miss me very much, and I miss them in spite of my pleasant life. Most of all I feel homesick for our chapel. At Christmas it was a labor of love to decorate it, and here it is all so different. I miss the beauty of our religious ceremonies. I do not know that they themselves take one nearer heaven, and I feel there are many good people like these little gray-garbed Friends who know nothing of them; but I feel also that they give an exaltation to our devotion. I like to see the altars in memory of the Child and to our Father heaped with the best our hands can give. Surely the warmth and color of our service, and the grandeur of echoing choirs are acceptable to Him. If beauty of sight and sound were not good and to be desired in His eyes, would there be lavished on our earth the brightness of blossoms that could only have opened their loveliness under the smile of God? or could we hear the echo of His voice that comes through the grandeur of oceans, the lips of shells or the throats of birds? I can imagine one who is weak in faith turning atheist; but I can never imagine one reared in our church who would desert it for the colder forms.

"You will think my letter endless. I shall be glad

when we meet, when there will be no need of letters. I thank you for the books you sent. I wonder if there was ever another sister like you? I think not, never one so thoughtful, so kind in all things. I take with open hands all the pleasures you lavish on me, and in return I give nothing. I wonder if I shall ever be able to repay you. I fear not. But every day of my life I pray that it may be so—that I may be shown some way in which I can prove my gratitude.

"To-morrow Friend Mortimer is to take me to a village five miles away where there is one of our churches. It is very kind of him to take the trouble; but he is always kind. Every night in my prayers I wish that the lady may yet be more tender and learn to love him. It seems silly for me to care, but I do not like to see his eyes look sad."

"Loving little heart," murmured Merze gently, as she finished the letter. "Gratitude to *me!* I think the sense of having someone dependent on me to care for, a pure young life to save from the pitfalls of my own, was all that saved me from going mad those dreadful days."

The routine of Merze's life in New York had become irksome to her, and when there had been some talk of sending the company on the road, she showed as much animation as she did in anything of late, and expressed herself as willing to go, if they could find a substitute for her in the stock company of the "Chatel" until the short tour through the West should be finished.

"It is foolish for you to do so," admonished Orlane and others of her friends. "Your position here is assured. Do not throw it aside and give opportunities to another. The public is always fickle."

"It is the best way to determine my own worth," she

replied. "If I merit their approbation I shall get it, no matter who is in the field, and if I do not—well, the sooner I know it the better."

Guarda, himself, had advised nothing. "Consider well before you decide," he had said; that was all. He was glad that she was at all interested in anything, and he felt a pleasure in the thought of getting her away from her rooms in that house. He knew it could not but have a bad effect on her; for the ghosts of a dead love and a dead crime would walk ever beside her through those halls.

She wanted to go to Crista, but felt she was not strong enough. She knew the girl could not but wonder at her silence regarding herself and her marriage. She had not told her as yet even of his death. There would be such an accumulation of things to be explained that she did not feel equal to the task. Perhaps on her return she would be. And so she left.

Her health was not good. It seemed strange that she who had always been so strong should have to submit to the care of a physician.

"Over-work," said that gentleman decidedly. "Get away from here, any where; leave the work behind you; travel if possible; change of air will do you good, more than medicine. A severe attack of nervous prostration will be the next on your list if you don't get away from this treadmill. 'Only three hours' work in a night?' —you are not able to stand one. 'Hand steady, eh?'— Yes, but how about the brain, and sleepless nights? Don't come to me for advice if you don't intend to take it."

And so it had been settled that she was to go with the company, and Guarda, also. The travel was a new ex-

perience to her. Since her childhood she had traveled but little, and the beauties of the journey from the Hudson to the Mississippi had done as much as anything could do to rouse her from her melancholy. The love of nature in its varied forms was always strong in her, untrained, unconscious pantheist that she was.

It was in St. Louis that Crista's letter came to her as she sat idly by the window looking out and thinking that somewhere about there she must have lived in the old days. She could not remember where their house had been, but Jack had spoken of being in "high luck" in St. Louis, and she remembered their floating down past there afterward when they landed the little shanty-boat long enough for her to go up and skirmish around until she could sell the big bundle of "sang root" she carried, and get some cheap coffee and necessary articles. Jack could not go for them, because his shoes were not fit.

What a wretched life it had been, and how impotent had seemed her protests against it! And now, with all her gain of hard-earned place and praise, was the stormy heart any nearer rest? It was, at least, rebellious no longer, and if the calm was not that of content, it was as peaceful outwardly; and none but herself knew that the stillness was that of a chastened soul under the hand of what she deemed a just retribution.

To please Guarda she tried to show interest in the many places and things he wished her to see. Her success had been very flattering, and she was thankful for her work. Those three hours were the only waking ones out of the twenty-four in which she could forget herself, and she was grateful for the assumed personality.

Guarda entered with hat and cane, looking astonished

as he found her in morning dress and slippers, with Crista's letter open in her hand.

"You are a fine young lady," he began; "still in that dress, and here am I, an old man, through a lot of business, and now ready for our walk."

"Our walk?"

"Certainly, our walk. Have I brought you away out here to let you return as ignorant as you came? Of course not. You must see something of the sights; so get ready and come along."

"Really, Massa Mark," she protested, smilingly, "I am very comfortable as I am."

"I believe you; *too* comfortable. I can't stand it to see people enjoying such elegant ease. I have had to spoil you lately a little, but now as you are growing more like yourself, I shall be as tyrannical as ever; so prepare yourself."

"Very well; I submit. But listen first to Crista's letter; it has just come. It is so like herself, tender-hearted and sympathetic."

"Spare me the praises; I have to listen to a series of them every letter that comes. She is incomparable; I take that for granted. But proceed. I am ready to listen."

And he settled himself with a martyr-like expression on his whimsical old face. He was in the best of spirits, for he told himself a dozen times a day that she was improving—was more like herself—and that was enough to repay him for separation from even his beloved New York.

"Remember," he stipulated, as she was about to begin, "if I listen, you, in return, must come out with me."

"Where?" she asked, looking up. "I will make no rash promises. Your propensities for sight-seeing are becoming alarming. I don't care to bind myself blindly to your chariot wheels."

"But it is not far to-day, Merze; only a few blocks from the hotel, and it is to a little coffee-house."

She looked at him in surprise.

"Yes," he nodded, "that is where I shall take you; where you can take your coffee and your doughnuts and your pie on one of the little wooden tables, or, if you choose, you can climb up on a high stool and take them from the counter."

"Well," she said, resignedly, "go on; tell me what you mean."

"I mean I have found a bonanza!" he announced, characteristically. "Yes, that is what it is to me. You know my hobby for old engravings, old play-bills, and such things? Well, down in that little coffee-house is a man with whom it has been more than that; it is a passion. For over twenty years he has been gathering one here, one there, until the walls of his house are lined with them, and cases and trunks stored away contain chronicles and pictured faces that date back to the beginning of our art in America. As I looked over them yesterday, a multitude of histories passed in review before my memory. But I was not selfish enough to enjoy them alone. I waited, and have come for you, and you will miss a great treat if you do not come. My words can give you but little idea of the wealth to our profession that is garnered in that unassuming little place."

"Certainly; I shall be glad to go if it will please you."

"Very well; I will go so far in return then to say I shall be glad even to listen to the girl's letter to please you;" and he leaned his chin on the hands that were clasped over his cane, while he listened to the letter with a face like a sphinx, for all the interest it showed.

"What do you think of her now?" she asked, triumphantly. Surely he could not withstand the sweetness of the nature that showed through the written lines. He looked at her a moment, and then said:

"Well, I think about the first thing she will do will be to marry 'Friend Mortimer.'"

"Massa Mark!"

The voice was one of horror—a wild protest against the thought that was hateful to her.

"Why not?" he asked, brusquely. "I told you how it would be. And this is the first gentleman she has known. I thought it would be the first. And he, I suppose, is some broken-hearted lover going into retirement to mourn a faithless Rosalind. Well, he has found a Juliet willing to heal his scars."

"Massa Mark, don't be sarcastic over it," she pleaded. "Surely you must be mistaken. She is such a child; that is why she writes in this frank, impulsive manner. She means nothing."

"I can easily see that," he answered, grimly. "If she did she would not say so much. You don't know much of your own sex, Merze, or you would see as clearly as I. She is young, lovely, charming, with a bent for romances. The first man she meets is a hero in her eyes. He is sad; she sympathizes in a tender, childish way. Men are only mortal, my dear Merze. Tenderness and sympathy from soft eyes are coins that pass current the world over in exchange for men's hearts."

"It would be dreadful," she said, more to herself than to him.

"I doubt if she will think so. Come, come, Merze, don't take it so seriously. You must expect something of the sort sometime if she does not return to the convent."

"I never expected it, never." It seemed to her that everything was slipping from her grasp.

"That is because you live too much in a world by yourself to know much of human nature in others. But we will hope for the best, since the idea seems to displease you. You can do nothing, at any rate, until you return to the East. Come, get on your things to go out. Let the Quaker and your young saint discuss theology to their hearts' content, but don't worry your brain over them. Come with me instead, and see the collection of pictures."

And he shambled down stairs, striking each step viciously with his cane as he went. He could see that their pleasure was spoilt for that day, perhaps for many to come, and all because of that girl.

"A young saint," he grumbled while waiting for Merze. "Bah! why not? But would she be one if her life had been laid in the same path with Merze's? Only through the fire of the furnace can we test the clay."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"And that is all the knowledge you have of her family?"

"That is all, Mortimer. I hear her mention no kindred but this one sister who is married, who provides

for her well, and to whom she gives great love. It is strange to me that she should be left so to herself. But the worldly are prone to paths of folly, and their lights may show them how little she is fitted for such wanderings."

"You are right, mother; feet like hers would be lost in the labyrinths. She should be shielded always from the fret of the world."

"Would thee wish her shield to be the walls of a convent, my son?"

The question caused him to turn wondering eyes to the placid face.

"I do not know—I have not thought," he answered; "but even that would be better than sending her out into the whirlpool of fashionable life, which is no doubt what her sister shares. Yes, I see nothing that is better for her than the convent." And yet, he felt a half irritation at the thought.

"Would not the peace in a husband's home be better?" and with the slow earnest words came to him the sense of her meaning.

"Mother!" he said sharply, rising and walking across the room and back again. Then he stopped beside her and asked more quietly, "What has given you such thoughts?"

"If thee was not so blind thy own eyes would see," she answered, smiling a little into his troubled face, and then continued more seriously: "My son, thy home-coming was for rest, so thee said, rest from the world, that thee might do in peace thy work; well, my eyes are old, but they see clearly that more than rest—content has in part come to thee through this child who would be more than friend, who would be wife if thee should so choose."

"Mother!" and he sat down, leaning his head on his hand, trying to think back over those quiet days. Content! Yes, in a way, but it was only that of resignation to him. And content alone is very dangerous to either husband or wife. Wife! He had not thought of it. The difference in their ages had made it seem a thing impossible. Through that safeguard he had been kind unto tenderness in many ways that ranged themselves in mute reproach before him now. He had thought of her only as of a child, loving-hearted to all alike; but perhaps he had allowed his own pain to blind him, perhaps he had been selfishly resting in this sweet friendship, heedless of what it might mean to her.

His mother touched him on the shoulder. "Will thee give to me a daughter, Mortimer?" she asked with kind eyes bent on him. She knew he would never wed among her own sect, and though Crista's religion was not a pleasure to her, she felt that nowhere else would he find a wife with such singleness of heart and purity of life. And of late she had noticed how the girl's eyes would light at sight of him, how a careless word of praise from him would leave her happy and singing about the house all day. And at last she determined to speak to him.

Clasping his hand over the one on his shoulder, "Mother," he said, "mother, you speak for the best, I know. But I am old enough to be her father. What is there to offer in exchange for that young life? I have no love to give, and, deep as my reverence for her is, I know I never shall have."

"Perhaps in time—" she began, but he checked her.

"I have no such hope, mother. I told you of a lady for whom I might ask your love, did I not? Well,

listen; I have avoided all mention of her, but now I must speak and leave you to judge for me. You see my hand?" and he held out the scarred member. "I told you not to question me regarding it. That was injured in her service weeks ago. I can not tell you what my love and reverence for her were—to me she was the one woman in the world. Well, all hope of our lives being spent together is past. She has been unworthy of my faith. Our paths are parted. I hope never to see her face, but so long as those scars remain, so long as life lasts, I know that no other woman will take her place in my thoughts."

"My son, love such as that is unholy. Thee should not garner up thy affections where there is no room for respect. It will bring no blessing."

"I have no hope that it will, my mother," he answered bitterly. "I only tell you this to show you how little I am fit to share this young girl's life. I leave you to judge if I am not right."

The little lady rocked her low chair in silence for a while before answering.

"My Mortimer," she said, at last, "the Spirit gives to me no light wherein I can see that thee is. A love which thee knows well is unworthy, and yet which binds thee, is akin to the witcheries that raged because of the evil passions in men's souls; and I know of no act more potent to exorcise them than the content and peace of a life with a pure woman."

He made no reply. He had asked her judgment and she had given it, earnestly and placidly, but with little comprehension of the love she condemned. Her own journey on life's river had been one of calmness and peace. She knew nothing of the tempests that stir the

depths of ocean, and draw down darkness that veils forever the stars. He knew that, but at the same time he knew that after a fashion he was not guiltless in the matter of his friendship with Crista. If his mother was right, if she did care, he felt that the fault lay in his carelessness. She was only a child, but he should have thought for her.

"You think she cares, mother?" he asked at last.

"Notice for thyself with this new light in thy mind," answered the old lady as she heard the young girl's step on the porch.

"Poor child!" he said as he opened the door and she entered looking at him with dear, glad eyes and a light in them that made him turn away with a tired feeling in his heart.

"Ah, Friend Mortimer!" she said gaily, "you should have been along. I walked to the foot of the mountain, a mile away. It is beautiful. Already the sun is growing quite warm. And what has made the whole day seem lovely to me is a letter from my sister Mercy. Perhaps she may come soon to see me. She has been traveling, but now she is to return to New York, and will come here at once. Are you not glad?"

"Glad to lose thee?" and the old lady shook her head smilingly. "Surely thee can not expect us to be glad for such a loss."

"Not to lose me. When she sees how happy I am and how beautiful it is to live here, she may get a home somewhere near. I should like that, except for the loss of our church—we should have to go a long distance."

"I hope thee will find happiness wherever thee is," said Mrs. Menturn, kindly.

"I seem to find nothing else, Friend Prue," and the

girl kissed her cheek warmly. "My life appears selfish to me at times. One's days should be passed in some more useful way than in the mere enjoyment of pleasures, when there are so many wretched people in the world whom we might help to happiness, if we only knew. And I have received also to-day a letter from the convent, from Sister Paul, such a kind letter! They ask if it is possible for me to go to them at Easter, if only for a few days. It is a great pleasure to know they all care for me so much. I shall write at once and ask Mercy's consent."

In the excitement of her letters and her gladness at the thought of seeing Merze, she had for a time not noticed the quiet of the man's face. When she did, her eyes changed quickly, and she walked directly to him, laying her hand on his arm.

"Friend Mortimer, what is it? You do not look happy."

"Few are so happy as yourself, Crista," he answered, evasively.

"But you have seemed so lately, so very much happier than when you came first, and now you should be doubly so. You are almost through with your work, and you will have more leisure, and we shall have whole days to share with you instead of only the evenings," and she smiled across to his mother as she spoke.

"But," he answered, trying to smile, also, "you do not take into consideration that when my work is finished I shall go away again."

"Go—away!" It was not a question, only a dull repetition of his words. The letters in her hand were forgotten. They fell unheeded to the floor, while she stood looking at him as if unable to gather the sense of

his words. The old lady picked up the letters and laid them aside, as if not noticing her agitation.

"I have laid thy letters on the mantel-shelf, Crista, child," she said, kindly. "Thy walk has tired thee, I think. Betha shall make thee a cup of tea."

Crista scarcely heard. Her eyes were on his face, in which she could see suffering, though she did not know the cause.

"Go away!" The words fell heavily on her heart. She had not thought of it, unless it was as of something in the far future, and, coming suddenly like that, she could only repeat the words and feel through them a sense of loss.

"Crista, Crista!" he said, remorsefully, "would you care so much?"

"*Care!*" The tears were filling her eyes as she looked at him. All else was forgotten in that moment but the one thought that he was going away, and his journeys were sometimes so long—she might never see him again, and——

"Don't cry, Crista," he said, a little brokenly, "but listen to me. I am an old man in contrast with your years, but there is only one way in which you can ask me to remain—now, and that is to say you will be my wife."

She looked at him wonderingly through her tears. The thought of wifehood had never come to her; he felt sure of that from her face.

"A wife—I!" That seemed as difficult to comprehend as his going away. "Do you, Friend Mortimer, do you mean that, a wife?"

"I mean that, if you think you would be contented so. Am I to go or stay?"

It was not a lover-like wooing, but his face was very kind, and to lose sight of it, perhaps forever, was a thought she could not endure. She left her hand lie in his and said, softly:

"Please stay, Friend Mortimer."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

In some way the old happy friendship seemed lost between them after the strange betrothal in which the word love had not entered. The two old ladies were delighted; Prue expressed her pleasure and Betha echoed it a dozen times a day. But the couple most interested found themselves at a disadvantage with which they never had to combat before.

The old ladies, with the best of intentions, left them more to themselves than of old. But fond as they were of each other, they found the subjects for conversation that had formerly been the most fascinating, dull and spiritless; why? Perhaps because each showed too plainly how great was the effort to please.

He was very gentle and loving in his tone and manner to her. Once he had clasped his hands about her face and kissed her reverently on the forehead; she was still to him his ideal of a young saint, whom man's kisses should not tarnish. And she, looking wistfully at him, wondered if it was so he would have kissed the lady whom they had spoken of as having his love once.

She thought he did not look as happy as before, and alone at night the tears would come in spite of her as she thought of the dear, dead friendship for which they had so little recompense. Was it love? she wondered.

He had not said so, though he had called her childish pet names and teased her a little about her old idea of being a nun. But the jest had a hollow ring in her sensitive ear. She felt, at times, like going to him and asking: "Do you love me? are you happy?" but a shyness had come over her when with him. She could not speak in the old fearless way, and to Merze she wrote:

"I hope you can come soon, my dear sister. I have new and strange things to tell you. I scarcely know yet myself whether it is happiness or not. But Friend Mortimer asked me two days ago to be his wife, and I said yes. You may think this very wrong without consulting you. I know that would have been only right, but please do not blame him, for I feel sure the fault is mine; we have been such very good friends. It has been such a pleasure for me to be with him, and when he spoke of leaving home, and I might never see him again, it seemed to me as if an end of all things had come. I am not sure what I said or did, but I know I was very silly and cried, and begged him not to go, and then, almost before I knew it, I had promised to be his wife if he remained. And you must not blame him, for if it had not been for my folly, I feel sure he would have waited until he had seen you, and then asked quite properly, if at all. That thought will keep intruding on my mind—the fear that he asked only because he was sorry to leave me when I cried. I may be wrong; I hope so.

"He is grand, I think. I am more in awe of him than when we were only friends—*only* friends! I am not quite sure what we are now. But I love and admire him very much. I think there is no one like him. He is not young; he says he is old enough to be my father,

but I am sure he does not look so. He is tall and dark and very handsome. I hope you will like him, and be friends. To-day he said if I would give him your address he would write you, but I asked him to wait until you came, which will, I hope, be soon.

"A letter came to-day from Sister Paul. They want me much to go to them for Easter, and I think I should like to. I am homesick for a sight of our chapel decked in its flowers, and the Easter lilies white as the soul of the Christ.

"I hope you will not be vexed with me, my sister. I am not so happy as I should be, and the thought of your displeasure would make me very wretched. He has said nothing of our marriage, but acts as if that is a question for you to decide; he seems to think me only a child. But I am not sure. People outgrow their childhood very quickly, sometimes, and I feel as if I have done so. I wonder if people who love can forget easily? It is not long since they spoke of his love for some lady away from here. I think it was a half fanciful idea I had conceived of them and their love that first made me love him, and now he has asked for me as a wife. He could not have loved her if he has forgotten her so soon. But perhaps he has not forgotten. I would like to ask, but am afraid of what the answer might be."

This letter, despite Guarda's prophesies, was a terrible shock to Merze on her arrival in New York, and one that took all her remaining strength to endure. For weeks the old man could deceive himself no longer. Instead of gaining in health she was slowly but surely declining. She smiled at his anxieties over her, and declared herself not ill. But one by one of the rings worn in the impersonation of the dashing Parisienne had

to be laid aside or altered by the jeweler because of the sad shrinking of slim white fingers. And the large, shadowy gray eyes had hollows about them that told their own tale of growing weakness.

Guarda had waited impatiently for their return that she might have the girl with her if it would add any to her content. He felt that he himself was not enough. She needed some object to care for who would be dependent on her, something to rouse her to an idea that she was needful. He could only pet her and sympathize with her through all his kindly warm heart, but that had proved a narcotic instead of an elixir. And so, instead of grumbling over the question of Crista, he had at last begun to look forward to seeing her as impatiently as Merze herself.

And now this letter, with its childish love, the love that was half doubt, had been hurled by the fates with a force that crushed out all her fancies of the ideal sisterhood they were to share.

"Ah, this terrible love, this terrible love!" she moaned, letting the letter drop from her nerveless fingers.

And poor old Mephisto, for all his devotion to her, could only sit silent, knowing that love had indeed proved itself terrible to her.

"We will go at once!" Her words were a half appeal to the objection she feared.

"Now? Ah, Merze, be patient. Haste will not alter it. You are not able. The journey here has exhausted you. Let me go and bring her to you. That is best."

"No, no," she protested, hastily. "That I could not stand; to wait here counting the hours until you would come back? No; I will be strong enough. If you will only come with me."

"I should not think of having you go alone," he answered, simply.

She turned to him swiftly with outstretched hand. "My Mephisto," she said, with tender eyes, "I should never deem love terrible while I have you. Do not think me ungrateful. I never am that; and I know, know always that nothing so perfect, so unselfish as your love and friendship will ever come into my life."

"My child," and the voice was low and tremulous with the pleasure of her words. He said no more, but the old eyes held in them a depth of love which her years of youth could never sound.

The sun was just setting over the mountains when a carriage stopped at the gate of the pretty Quaker farm-house, and Mrs. Menturn, who was on the porch, stepped down on the paved walk as the driver spoke.

"Friend Prudence, I have brought to thee some kindred of thy young friend."

"They are welcome, Hiram, and I thank thee," answered the little lady, coming forward as a stooped, white-haired gentleman assisted a lady in black to alight.

"You are friends of Crista?" and she held out her hand, thinking as she did so that the lovely lady in her sombre draperies looked as a tired queen might look.

"Yes," answered Merze, clasping the delicate little hand warmly; "and I know from her letters that you are Mrs. Menturn. I have to thank you much for her happy life with you."

"The child has been a blessing to us. Give thy thanks to God, not to man," and then she turned to Guarda; "and thee?"

"He is also a friend, though unknown to her," and Merze introduced him, adding: "I have not been well,

and feared to take the journey alone, and I could not wait longer to see her."

"Thee will prove a welcome guest, I do assure thee."

They had reached the porch, and as she opened the door into the room where Crista and Betha were sitting, there was a glance of wonder from the blue eyes, and the next instant they were in each other's arms—Crista laughing and crying at once in her delight.

Merze, after the first greeting, felt Guarda's hand on her own. "Sit down," he said, ever on the watch for her comfort. "You are exhausted and trembling. This journey has been too much for you."

She did so, obediently, feeling that he was right; it had tired her more than she realized until after the goal was reached.

Clasping Crista's hand in hers, she sat looking earnestly in the blue eyes until they wavered and fell beneath her own.

"You have been happy here!"

"Very, very happy, sister," and Guarda, noting her beauty, her childish charm of manner, did not wonder so much at Merze's fondness for her.

"Too happy to leave it with me?"

The girl hesitated a moment, and then said: "Wherever you wish me to be I shall be content, knowing that you do all for the best, and I should like never to be separated from you."

"Thy answer is most prudent, Crista, and suits well thy years and loving heart. Heaven bring blessings to thee, and aid thee to judge wisely for thy future."

"Be it so," echoed Betha, as she followed Prue from the room, knowing that there would be much to say that

was not for strange ears. Crista touched the black folds of Merze's dress questioningly.

"It is worn because of Mr. Lawrence," said Merze; "he is dead, and when there is more time we will speak further of it; there are many things to talk of, but not now. I wanted to return to-night, but Mr. Guarda thinks I must remain at the hotel for one night's rest before going back. And I would want you to go with me, for a short time at least; then if you choose you can return. Will that please you?"

"Very much, my dear, dear Mercy," answered the girl, earnestly. She had been looking at Merze as she talked; finally she said, turning to Guarda:

"Has, has she been very ill? The longer I look the more plainly I see the change in her face. Ah, my sister, you have been suffering while I have had only enjoyment, and all through your kindness. You should have sent for me and let me nurse and take care of you."

"I have had the best of care," answered Merze, looking kindly at Guarda. Crista's quick eyes noted the old man's face as he smiled back. She rose and went over to him.

"I was so glad to see her that I scarcely spoke to you," she said, frankly. "But I see you love each other, and that makes me want to know you better. Will you let me thank you for your care of her? She is the dearest of all in the world to me, and since I can be of no use to her I pray that the saints may have ever in their keeping those who can," and she stooped, kissing with reverence his hand that lay on the back of Merze's chair.

His prejudice faded away under the simple earnestness of her manner. He held her hand in his closely. "I hope we shall know each other better, child. And how

about your other friend whom we are to see? You are surely not so selfish as to keep him out of sight."

Her face flushed warmly, and she turned to Merze. 'Does he know? Did you tell him?"

"Yes, dear, and he will be your friend, I feel sure, as well as mine. But are we to hear nothing of Mr. Mortimer?"

"I had forgotten in the gladness of your coming," she answered a little hesitatingly. But he will soon be here; he has gone to the village for the mail, and seldom remains so long. Ah, my sister, I do so hope you will like each other."

Even as she spoke they heard a voice saying: "Yes, my mother, a letter for Crista. Where is she?"

The girl flew to the door to open it, while Merze and Guarda both rose to their feet at the sound of that voice. Her face was white as death, and she could not steady herself enough to raise her eyes at first.

Crista held his hand as she entered. He saw a thin, black-robed woman with bent head, and though he could not see the face, a thrill passed over him at sight of the form that looked so familiar. Then he heard Crista's voice saying:

"Friend Mortimer, this is my sister, Mrs. Lawrence. Mercy, my dear sister, this is my friend I have told you of—Mr. Drande."

As she raised her face, the change in it was so startling that he took a step toward her with outstretched hands and his heart on his lips as he spoke her name, "Merze!"

"It is—*you.*"

She tried to steady herself, but her strength was gone, and she dropped like a dead thing at his feet.

CHAPTER XL.

Into Crista's room he carried her, where she lay white and still, despite the efforts of the women.

"I told thee wisely, Betha, when I said she looked more fit for a bed than a journey."

"That thee did, Prue, and I fear me it is a bed she will keep for many a day."

Crista said little, only helped as she could with mute lips, and eyes steadied and deepened with the new light that had come to them.

Downstairs the old man sat alone in the lavender-scented room, where the firelight and the twilight mingled and faded. He could hear the murmur of voices and softly-moving feet in the room where they laid her, and above those sounds came to his ears the echo of a steady, monotonous walk overhead, and he knew it was Drande. There had been no explanations. It was a fatality in the use of the names that had blinded them. Crista, writing so much of him, had never once mentioned any name but Mortimer, because it was the only name she had heard him called. She had written of him as she had of Betha, always by his given name, and, long as he had known Drande, he had never heard him say what his second initial stood for. And so it had all happened by chance, if there be such a thing. And in the deepening dusk Guarda could only sit, helpless to her now, waiting for what news they might bring

him. The steps above him ceased, and a little later he looked up as the door was pushed open and Drande entered. There had been no exchange of words between them, and now there was neither greeting nor handclasp. The younger man spoke first:

"There is no need of our wasting words as to how this terrible mistake has been made," he said, coldly; "but I will leave to-night until after the removal of — Mrs. —of your friend. Before doing so I want to ask one question: What is she to Crista?"

"A very noble woman—a very loving, unselfish friend."

"But not her sister?"

"Not by blood—only through their love for each other and a whim of the girl's to be called so."

"Thank God for that, at least!" breathed Drande, with earnestness. The thought of their sisterhood had been a horrible one to him, and added to it was a passionate longing for the still face upstairs that drew all his love, even while it repelled him, by memories of that mysterious crime, and the fatal silence of her marriage. Guarda heard him and turned sharply.

"And why thank God?" he asked, in half anger at the tone. "Is it through the shame you feel for the faithlessness that let you vow to her, to me, your love for her not six months ago, and that now has won forgetfulness through the soft eyes of a child? You should thank God also if death comes to her under your roof. In no other way will rest ever reach her."

"Not while conscience is left to her," added the other.

"Bah! you are a fool." And Guarda rose impetuously. "Just for that one thing which she kept from

you, the secret of the marriage, you condemn her; and yet you loved her! Such love is worthless, worthless as the chaff that is blown unheeded from the wheat. But I will tell you of that; who knows but it may help her to a little content? You set yourself in judgment on her life, knowing nothing of her wretchedness. She had been his wife—yes; not through her choice, but through some supposed duty to her father. Poor child! her faith to what she thought her duties has brought to her sad troubles. Well, she was unhappy. They separated, and he insisted on an absurd promise of secrecy from her. She gave it willingly, earnestly. She wished in every way to make amends for the repugnance she felt at their relations. I could see it all, my poor, blind, generous Merze! When she found you cared for her, she went to him and begged him to give back her promise. You know how unlike himself he was toward the last. Well, he forbade her to tell, or made it conditional —if she acknowledged the marriage, he would claim her as his wife. That thought was a horror she could not endure. He even forbade her leaving the hotel where he was; not that he cared for her, but only to assert his power over a woman whose indifference was changing into loathing, and who, in spite of it, he determined should know him as her master. She kept it all to herself, fearing to worry me with her troubles. That day when you left us in her room, she told me the whole truth. And you—for that one sad enforced silence—you left her at her greatest need, left her knowing you had her love—the love you had asked for. I do not wonder you thank God she is not akin to the child you have asked as a bride. Shame should prompt you to that gratitude——"

"Stop!" said Drande, sternly, "I may deserve that in part, not wholly. It is not that silence alone which took me from her; it is the silence of yours and hers concerning that crime. You know what I mean."

"As to the identity of the woman?"

"As to the dagger I saw lying in her room that morning, and which I saw next struck through the heart of her husband—her husband whom she hated, dreaded, feared, and who was killed that night while he slept."

"Great heaven!" The words fell slowly from Guarda's lips as he comprehended Drande's meaning. "You could accuse her of such a crime, and yet had loved her?"

"She knew what my thoughts were; she knew I was justified in them, and made no sign of denial," answered Drande. With all his soul he wanted to believe in her, but in no way he looked could he see any hope to which he might cling.

"She knew you thought that of her? Then with all my knowledge of her she is more noble than I dreamed. She thought his death a terrible retribution on her for the wish of it she had fostered. If she knew your accusation she has accepted it in the same light. The thing has become a monomania, and that is what has been killing her for weeks, and she would have been silent to the last. My poor Merze, my poor Merze!" There was no mistaking the old man's earnestness and grief. He sat covering his face with his hands as the force of all she had endured in silence came to him. The man standing by the mantel felt a great throb of hope as he looked at him.

"She is *innocent?*" His voice trembled as he asked

the question. Ah! if he only dared have once more his faith in her.

"Yes;' and the old face in the flickering firelight seemed ennobled by the strength of his faith and love, "yes; and as much above your doubts as the stars that are shining high above us."

"Thank heaven and you!" and involuntarily his hand was outstretched, and in silence the old man clasped it. The deep, suppressed joy in his voice and the close clasp of the hand that trembled, told in part what torture that doubt had been. For a little while neither spoke; the heart of each was too full for words, and the assertion of her innocence had let loose a flood of hope, love, and remorse that drowned for a time all memories of aught but her.

"Don't think too contemptibly of me in this matter, Guarda," he said at last. "I had more reason for doubts than you are aware of; she will tell you so herself. She could have saved us both much suffering if she had but made one sign, spoken one word that day of the inquest; a look from her eyes would have been enough. But she gave nothing but a mute assent to the justice of my suspicion. It was her pride, I suppose, that forbade her attempting any removal of my doubts."

"No; it was something more noble than pride," said Guarda, earnestly. "A something that is the outgrowth of a strange nature and deep humility. It was the mistaken idea of a justice that was meted out as her portion. An expiation in silence and an endeavor to atone for the wrongs that have magnified under a morbid, self-accusing spirit. But it shall go no farther; whether it please her or not, there shall be no more secrecy. She has borne enough for that girl."

"What girl?"

"Crista. It was for her sake that she would not allow me to make known our theory of the murder; but I have it all, proofs, everything as close as circumstantial evidence can come. And they shall be given to the authorities at once. For no one's sake shall she suffer doubt or suspicion of that sort."

"For Crista's sake? I don't understand," said Drande in a perplexed way.

"Don't you? Everyone would but for the faith with which Merze has kept her trust. The woman who committed the crime was the one known in the house as his wife years ago, the one whom he reported dead for so long that none thought of starting on that scent. That woman was Crista's mother!"

There was a sound of startled horror from Drande, and another that sounded like a moan through the door he had left ajar unnoticed in the darkness; but neither of the men heard it. Guarda and he sat there long in the firelight, while he listened to the story of their theory, and the evidence gained. And through all concerning Lawrence and Crista, the thing that seemed uppermost was the endurance, the noble character, of the woman he had judged and condemned.

"You are right, Guarda," he said, staring into the mass of coals with moody, remorseful eyes. "I am unworthy, I think any man would be that. If I could only give the rest of my years in atonement."

"You cared so much?"

"It is not a thing I can speak of, or find words for, even to you, old friend. Through all my doubt and condemnation she was, she always will be, the one woman in life to me."

"Yet, there is the child Crista?"

"Yes; God help us both!"

All through the length of the night Crista sat beside the sleeping form so dearly loved. The light was turned low, but not too low for her to distinguish the tired, pale face on the bed, or the eyes in the picture above that had been so dear to her. Her eyes wandered from one to the other as she thought wistfully:

"I prayed for some way to show my gratitude; it is a heavier debt than I dreamed of, but it has come at last."

And she dropped on her knees by the window; the stars glittering above shone on the fair young face, as it pressed cold lips to the cold crucifix and murmured vaguely: "Help me—help me—help me!"

The stars glittered as if in mockery. The moon coquetted with the clouds. A very woman in the silver tints she lent to each as they passed, yet keeping ever her wealth of witchery to lavish on the next. They see so many woes, these eyes of the night; and their tears have been burned up ages ago; they have none left for humanity; they can only smile now, glitteringly, to hide the hollowness within themselves. And the ivory Christ, impressive as the heavens, cold as it ever is, lay in her hands, wet with her tears, and senseless as the dead beast from whose tusk it was carved. But in the white light of her innocence Crista had faith.

CHAPTER XLI.

God be with you
I bear you company no more. Behold
The dawn with white ray glimmering through the mist.
—*Dante.*

The dusk of early morning lay over the fields as the tempestuous hair was tossed back from wide, gray eyes, and Merze looked up into the young face above her.

"My dear Crista," she smiled, reaching out her white hands and trying to rise. But the girl gently pressed her back to the pillow.

"Not yet," she said, chidingly; "not until they bring you some toast and some tea; they will be up ere long."

"And you, dear! you are dressed for walking. Have you slept none?"

"No; but that does not matter. A walk down the lane before breakfast will drive away my dullness. I feared you might wake and want me. But friend Prue's herb tea did its work well; you slept soundly, and are much better."

"So much; and now——"

Her eyes, in wandering about the room, fell on the pictured face smiling down on her. Like a flash came back memories of the night before—memories the narcotic had stilled; and she could only close her eyes and lie speechless.

Crista sat beside her, and softly drew down her hands and kissed the white lids.

"My sister, my dear Mercy," she said, low and steadily, "I want you to be very happy here, and you must not begin by shunning his eyes. They are kind, loving eyes to all. He will come soon to speak with you, to clear away doubts which have lasted too long. And when he comes be kind to him, dear, for the sake of your happiness. He also has suffered much."

"Crista, Crista! what are you saying? How oddly you speak!" and her hands were trembling with the half hopes which the words brought. "You speak of happiness to me! Mine will only come through your companionship, when we go away together and live contented until—until——" Her lips refused to say, "until your marriage."

"Yes, yes!" Crista assented, tremulously. "But you are not strong enough to go yet; you will be here for many days. And I hope you will learn to love the people; they are so good, so kind. And——and if any of them try to help you to happiness, take it, dear, with grateful hands. I have seen so little of the world, but enough to show me it is a rare gift."

"Yes, Crista; but you?"

"I am going for a walk, if you don't mind being alone for awhile; the air will do me good. And look, dear!" she added, drawing back the curtain, "you can lie here and watch the sun rising away there in the east. See! its light already begins a halo around those far mountains. It is a new day, sister, creeping closer and brighter with every moment. Thank God! your night is past."

And then she stooped and kissed many times the wondering face, and, glancing once more up into the eyes of the picture, she passed out and down the stairs.

Although the morning star was still shining, she saw that she was not the only wakeful one. Guarda's white head was visible across the hedge of the garden.

"I could not sleep," he explained. "The quiet of peaceful life would be oppressive to me now. I have lived too long amid the rattle of carts over cobble-stones. But you, my dear—young things like you—should sleep better."

"I watched all night, lest she should waken and want me," she answered, simply. "But now she is better, much brighter, and will soon be strong again—with happiness to help her."

"Happiness?" and the old man looked at her narrowly.

"Yes, surely; why not? I am glad you are here. I can see how dearly you love her, and—" she hesitated under his eyes, that were looking at her so—"and last night I heard you say those proofs should be given to the world. Pray, do not allow her to dissuade you because of me. I shall have no name for disgrace to touch. I want the truth known now."

"You know that?" and he laid his hand on her shoulder, pityingly.

"I know *all*. I did not mean to listen. The door was ajar in the darkness. But I am glad now it was so; I should never have known otherwise. Do not tell them; it would only be a pain to both. You will keep this one secret for me, and do as I ask about those proofs? And now, good-by. I could not say so to them. They may think me ungrateful, but you will know it is not so. They will have my love, my prayers, my gratitude always; but I can not meet them now. Perhaps in the future I shall, if they will come—when all this is a thing of the

past. God bless you always. I go back to the convent; good-by!"

And with a clasp of hands, and glimmer of tears in her eyes, she turned away before he could speak, and walked swiftly down the lane under drooping branches, through which the sky could be seen tinged with a faint flush. Not once did she turn her face toward the peaceful nest where all her love, all her happiness, lay.

And on the white bosom lay the ivory Christ, over which her hands were clasped so closely that it bruised the fair flesh. It was all she had left to her. What the world had given it had demanded again. And with tired feet she wandered back as a sheep will to the fold, after seeing the depth of chasms down which others have dropped into darkness.

CHAPTER XLII.

Once we had one heart, one hope,
And we parted—how? and why?
Promise, now, we will not part—
You and I.

A little letter left at Drande's door, a letter addressed to himself and Merze, was read by them with tearful eyes and pitiful hearts. She was so dear to them both, and her decision was irrevocable.

"You called me Elaine, sometimes, in jest, Friend Mortimer. I think my love for you was what the poet made hers. I did not think to be your wife. I know you are fond of me; but with neither of us is it the fondness which should lead to marriage. It is a mistake we could not explain face to face. So I can only go away.

I leave the letter from Sister Paul; you will see she is to pass through the village this morning. I am going to meet her, and go back, never to leave again. Do not grieve, and do not let my dear Mercy. Go to her with this, read it together, and tell her the things I know you long to tell her. I love you both. I have asked her to be kind and listen to you. Make her life happy, and do not let your dear mother think me ungrateful. Do this for me, and do not let any regrets or thoughts of me keep you silent when you read this. Your names will always be together in my prayers. May we meet at the feet of God.

"CRISTA."

There was silence between them after the reading of the letter. It was as if a tomb had closed above her, and this, her last will, lay in their hands. Drande spoke first, and his voice was far from steady.

"Merze"—how dear the name sounded on his lips! —"the child has left me her legacy. It scarcely seems fitting to speak now of love or happiness; but I can not leave you until I know what our lives are to be to each other. You have been first in my thoughts through all; and now I ask, in all love, in all reverence, grant me Crista's gift, let me try to make amends for the past— be my wife."

Surely it was a strange wooing after the tempests of passion their eyes had seen in each other. Fate had swung them off into this harbor, where peace reigned, where all tumultuous waves were lulled to rest, and their love in its very quietness was greater than ever before.

Was it because they realized the greatness of the sacrifice that had been made to the gods for it? Something like that passed through Merze's mind.

"I feel as if I am building happiness on that child's heart," she said, tremulously, as she gave him her hand.

That was all. There was no need for words between them of that past, with its bitterness and its mistakes. They were together; that was enough. And truly, "Love sees as God sees, and with infinite wisdom has infinite pardon."

To Guarda it was a joy, because of Merze. She was first in all things. But many days went by ere he could forget the young face in the dawn with the steadiness of despair in her eyes. Her wishes were respected by him, and the proofs were given to the world, and cleared away the mystery of the crime. But that conversation, with the morning star shining overhead, was one never spoken of, even to Merze.

"She was a great blessing, a child of light," said Friend Prue, with tears in her eyes. "But it is their church that has drawn her from us; it has great power."

And Guarda, who heard, answered: "If it has power to instill such purity of life, such nobility of soul, into the hearts of its people, God prosper it. Not fitted for our world? No, she was as much out of place in it as an archangel walking among us in the livery of heaven. I was unjust to her once, but she has conquered. They are two noble hearts; one strong through her faith and religion, and the other despite the lack of it. Which is greater? Ah, who can tell! There is a warning in that old Italian poet's vision which repeats itself in my mind:

> Be wary how ye judge!
> For we who see our Maker know not yet
> The number of the chosen.

CHAPTER XLIII.

Easter morning wakened warm from the kiss of south winds, sweet with the fragrance of first blossoms, and shining softly as the brightest jewel in the circle of sacred days.

Through that glad radiance fell the words that made Merze again a wife, and gave her into the shelter of a home where rest for the soul was not a figure of speech, but a reality that grew on her day by day until the one lack of her life was filled at last.

"Sanctuary? yes," she said, that fair morning, looking into her husband's eyes; "it will always be that to me here—sacred."

"And your art, the stage?" he smiled, questioningly.

"Is none the less so, dear," she answered. "Would you want the artist lost in the woman?"

"No, Merze, that folly is past," and he smoothed back the waves of bronze hair that clustered around the face, lovelier than ever with returned health and content. "No; your work is not the empty tinkle of cymbals. I prefer what I possess—artist and woman merged in one."

"And which you, not knowing your power, helped to mold when as a child you were my divinity, my oracle of a day," and then she smiled, seeing the white hair of Guarda through the open window. "So you grant admission to two rivals, my work and Massa Mark?"

"Always Massa Mark," he assented. "Who could imagine one of you without the other? Sometimes I am

tempted to jealousy; your devotion is palpable to the world."

"And it never will be less," she answered, taking the old man's hand as he came out and stood beside them on the long white porch. "Our bond is a strong one, is it not, 'Mephisto'? forged long ago through a romance of ours—one whose leaves are bound close by the hair of a dear, dead woman—a romance of the past."

"All romances are of the past or the future," said Guarda. "Distance must mellow the tints as age does that of a painting. When seen in the present, the thread of bitterness or sorrow is all our eyes perceive; and in romances there is always sorrow for someone."

And his eyes wandered down the lane where he had seen the young girl's form lose itself in the dusk of dawn under the morning star. Merze clasped his hand closer. Drande in silence turned into the house.

"Massa Mark," she said, her voice lowered a little by the earnestness of his words, "Massa Mark, I wonder sometimes if you do not condemn in part this happiness that was purchased so dearly. Do not think me careless of her, at the last. If I could have kept her or brought her back, all our lives would have been different."

"I know that, Merze, and she knows it. Have no regrets. Life is too short for them, and it is best as it is, for all the pity of it. She is a young saint, as you said long ago. The only bridal veil for such is the one she has taken. Men can not kiss the lips of madonnas, my dear."

THE END.

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